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HUNGARIAN ROMA AND AFRICAN AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE:

LAKATOS, PELINE NYARI, WRIGHT, AND HURSTON

by

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Janet A. Walker

and approved by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Hungarian Roma and African American Autobiographies

in Comparative Perspective:

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By TAMAS DEMENY

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Janet A. Walker

My dissertation is a comparative study of the following Hungarian Roma and African American autobiographies: Menyhért Lakatos's *Smoky Pictures*, Hilda Péliné Nyári's *My Little Life*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, and Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*. I use the rich critical literature on African American autobiographies to better understand Gypsy autobiographies, about which there is a paucity of literary scholarship. I make use of the latest developments in theoretical writings about the genre of autobiography, particularly autoethnography. So, my study is a groundbreaking work on Hungarian Roma autobiographies, and my comparative method brings an original contribution to the fields of comparative literature and cross-cultural ethnic studies.

My dissertation focuses, on the one hand, on how the Hungarian Roma and African American authors grapple with ways to understand their own cultures and present their experiences and insights, and, on the other hand, on the equally complex presentations of contacts with the majority cultures. The authors search for ways to reveal

the dynamics of their cultures and their special positions within them, using the language, cultural productions, and ideologies of the majority culture, finding ways to express things that are often unthinkable in the majority culture's understanding of the world. A study of the narrators' relationships with their mothers and families opens up ways of understanding the complexities of their own cultures and their complicated relationships to these cultures. While descriptions of the relationships with the mothers are readily accessible to most readers, these descriptions point beyond themselves to the complicated and emotionally charged relationships to the cultures.

The presentation of intercultural encounters is equally unique and difficult in each case, as the subject of the minority culture describes experiences of oppression and disadvantaged status. Experiences of poverty, isolation, disrespect, and lack of access to education can be difficult to transmit because these experiences penetrate the deepest levels of one's being. I study the presentations of violence because violent experiences are palpable and emotional ways of encountering oppression at the hands of the majority culture. The understanding thus gained can explain the varying attitudes towards resistance among the four authors.

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## Introduction

My dissertation is a comparative study of two Hungarian Roma and two African American autobiographies, using the existing critical and theoretical literature on the African American writings to shed light on the much neglected Hungarian Roma literature. Menyhért Lakatos's *Smoky Pictures (Füstös képek)*, and Hilda Péliné Nyári's *My Little Life* and *Dodó and I* (in two volumes: *Az én kis életem, Dodó és én*) comprise almost the entirety of the Hungarian Roma autobiographical tradition in written format, calling out for attention, appreciation, study, and followers. Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy (American Hunger)* continue to stand as two defining masterpieces of African American autobiographical literature from the middle of the twentieth century, much discussed, critiqued, compared, and contrasted. Hence, a comparison of these four minority autobiographies might be a step in the increasingly globalized world's search for new coalitions for freedom and equality. I will first focus on how the authors struggle with ways to understand their own cultures and present their experiences and insights to the readers. Then, I will study the equally complex presentations of contacts with the majority cultures.

The rich critical and theoretical literature dealing with African American autobiographies in general, and the two works I have chosen in particular, will be used to better understand Gypsy autobiographies and Gypsy writing, about which there is a paucity of literary scholarship either in Hungarian or in English. I will also make use of the latest developments in theoretical writings about the genre of autobiography, particularly autoethnography. My work is the first study of its kind on Hungarian Gypsy autobiographies, and I trust it will promote the much needed and deserved

acknowledgement of their literary and artistic values. Moreover, I hope that these comparisons will also shed light on some previously unexplored issues in the works of Wright and Hurston as well. Using the words of Michael Grobbel, I want my work to "encourage non-Romany readers to revise their relationship with the Roma" (Grobbel 146). I also hope that my serious scholarly investigations will encourage further studies, contributing to the development of Hungarian Roma literary scholarship and intellectual work.

The authors need to look for ways to reveal the dynamics of their cultures and their own special experiences within them, using the language, cultural productions, and ideologies of the majority culture, finding ways to express things that are often unthinkable in the majority culture's understanding of the world. Hurston's understandings of African American folk culture, Wright's traumatic experiences of his childhood, Péliné's particularly strong family relationships, and Lakatos's grapples with a mythic past are examples of unique and special experiences of minority life that may not be immediately available either to readers of the majority culture or even to members of the authors' own ethnic groups. This understanding and presentation must be done in a situation where the author's own subject position is already tenuous, being distanced—through education and profession—from the minority culture described, but not being a part of the majority culture in which the writing takes place. I find that a study of the narrators' relationships with their mothers and families opens up ways of understanding the complexities of their own cultures and the authors' complicated relationships to these cultures. While descriptions of the relationships with the mothers are readily available to most readers, these descriptions point beyond themselves to the uniquely complicated and

emotional relationships to the narrators' cultural and social backgrounds. While the mothers of Hurston and Péliné are of prime importance in carrying values of culture and perseverance in an environment deemed hopeless by many, Wright's and Lakatos's presentations of their mother characters reveal complex understandings of relating to racial and political issues.

The presentation of intercultural encounters is equally unique and difficult in each case, as the subject of the minority culture describes experiences of oppression and disadvantaged status. The often traumatic experiences of discrimination, violence, poverty, isolation, lack of access to education, or simply not being considered a person can be difficult to transmit. I consider the study of violence useful in minority narratives because experiences of violence are palpable and emotional ways of encountering oppression at the hands of the majority culture. Violence appears in all four books, and it can give the most readily accessible descriptions of intercultural encounters. It represents the physical and material realities of living in an oppressive environment, while also standing for other forms of being violated, of having to live in the contact zones of cultures, and finding expectations, dreams, freedom stifled. While inter-racial violence is an understandable representation of all other kinds of violations done by the majority culture against oppressed minorities, intra-racial violence indicates the depth to which oppression has penetrated the deepest recesses of minority life. The traumatic experiences of violence in Wright underline the depth to which oppression has entered his personal life. The young Zora Neale Hurston's fights develop her personality, while violence and the threat of violence between blacks and whites urge her to develop her own unique attitude towards race issues. Lakatos's experiences of violence emphasize both the

importance and the difficulties of achieving his goals of work and education. Péliné uses scenes of violence to emphasize the degrading nature of poverty and the importance of the family's safety-net. A study of violence in all four narratives is a background against which I will consider the various representations of other forms of oppression and possible responses to these.

## **General Introduction to the Four Texts**

### *The Choice of African American Narratives*

Among twentieth-century African American autobiographies, Richard Wright's and Zora Neale Hurston's are of primary significance. The importance of each has been acknowledged by such famous critics as Irving Howe and Henry Louis Gates. For example, Howe wrote about Wright: "The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever ... *Black Boy*, which appeared five years after *Native Son*, is a slighter but more skillful piece of writing" (Howe 121); while Gates concludes in his "Afterword" to *Dust Tracks on a Road* that "Hurston became a metaphor for the black woman writer's search for tradition" (Gates, "Afterword" 288). Read together, Hurston's and Wright's autobiographies raise even more important critical and theoretical issues. Gates claims that "[f]ew authors in the black tradition have less in common than Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright" (Gates "Afterword" 290). Katherine Henninger notes that while Wright and Hurston were "two of the South's most famous sociological and anthropological investigators," they are "most often paired as ideological opposites, especially in matters of rhetorico-literary strategy" (Henninger 581). Their ideological

opposition was already discussed in their lifetimes, and was apparent even for the authors themselves. Laura Dubek reports their mutual criticism of each other's works:

Both writers marked their territory with scathing reviews of the other's work: in 1937 Wright accused Hurston of pandering to minstrel stereotypes in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and in 1938 Hurston penned one of the few negative reviews of *Uncle Tom's Children*, dismissing it as 'a book about hatreds.' (Dubek 594)

The ideological difference between Hurston and Wright has been simply stated as one between the "protest fiction that Wright represented" (Howe 119) and "a positive analysis of black culture" (Alice A. Deck 237) found in Hurston's works. But their differing approaches to politics, society, and culture also influenced their views on the self and self-development. Stephen Butterfield, studying the important narratives of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Maya Angelou, states that African American autobiographies are characterized by

their political awareness, their empathy for suffering, their ability to break down the division of 'I' and 'you,' their knowledge of oppression and discovery of ways to cope with that experience, and their sense of shared life, shared triumph, and communal responsibility. The self belongs to the people and the people find a voice in the self. (Butterfield 156)

But Alice A. Deck points out that Butterfield leaves Hurston's memoirs out of his study, whereas *Dust Tracks on a Road* suppresses interracial conflicts in favor of presenting "one example of a black American who never considers enlisting in the regiment, because she defines herself in her text in terms other than warrior or defiant black activist" (Deck 237). Thus, the approach to social and political issues is closely linked to views on autobiographical self-image and self-creation.

More recently, however, critics have started to pay attention to the similarities between Hurston and Wright. In spite of Hurston's suppression of racial hatred, for

example, a strong social protest can also be found in her autobiography. At the same time, critics point out that issues of self-creation, emotional integrity, and need for a benign environment are also present in *Black Boy*. Petar Ramadanovic, reading Wright together with Jacques Lacan and Paul de Man "can suggest that Wright's autobiography is an attempt to redeem the violent world of his childhood and youth through his writing and, in the process, to give himself a definite, unified identity, keeping whole what Wright calls his 'emotional integrity'" (Ramadanovic 509). Will Brantley summarizes some of these issues as follows:

In a seminal essay on Hurston and Wright, June Jordan noted what she believes is a dangerous form of binary thinking – a critical tendency to separate black protest literature, the prototypical embodiment of which is Richard Wright, from the literature of black affirmation, perhaps best represented by Hurston. To this dualistic paradigm, Jordan responds, 'The functions of protest and affirmation are not, ultimately, distinct ... affirmation of Black values and lifestyle within the American context is, indeed, an act of protest.' In this sense, 'Hurston's affirmative work is profoundly defiant, just as Wright's protest unmistakably asserts our need for an alternative, benign environment. We have been misled to discount the one in order to revere the other' (5). In short, Jordan explains how an essentially 'affirmative' vision such as Hurston's can also be innately 'political.' (Brantley 218)

Re-reading their autobiographies, I will look for their very different but still comparable ways of dealing with issues of self-development, self-making, cultural belonging, social protest, patterns of resistance, and violence. While the political and protest issues are more foregrounded in Wright's *Black Boy* than in Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*, a careful reading can trace the more subtle, and perhaps more subversive, patterns of resistance in Hurston's writing, too. Similarly, while Hurston is known for celebrating her self and her culture, issues of personal integrity and the "affirmation of Black values" are important in Wright's narrative, too. Using the critical literature available for Wright and Hurston, as well as my own findings, I will study similar issues in Lakatos and Péliné.

### *The Choice of Roma Narratives*

In the Hungarian Roma tradition, there are no earlier written autobiographical novels of this kind; therefore, the two I chose are important because of their novelty in this tradition.

There are many Roma Autobiographies written in Europe and America—for example: Manfri Frederick Wood from Britain, Ceija Stojka from Austria, Otto Rosenberg from Germany, Ilona Lacková from Slovakia, Konrad Bercovici from Romania, and Ronald Lee from Canada. However, these and other Roma writers in other countries have had very different experiences from those of the Roma in Hungary, as I will detail below, in the historical overview. There is a very rich tradition of Roma literature in Hungary, but most of it is in the form of poetry and tales, and this is reflected in the studies that have appeared. Rajko Djuric's book *Roma Literature* lists major Hungarian and other European Roma writers, with a short introduction to each. Significantly, he does not mention Péliné at all, but Lakatos occupies a central position in his book. To the best of my knowledge, besides Lakatos and Péliné, only Zsolt Csalog and István Erdős have written Roma life narratives in Hungarian, but these are not really autobiographical.

The only literary study of Péliné was written by Judit Durst, whose essay I use widely. Ilona Baranyi wrote an article at the death of Péliné, but that contains mostly biographical details. Lakatos has been studied by many, but most of these studies center around his person, his public life, and his poetry. Gyula Kárpáthy has published interviews with him and Sándor Hegedűs has written a study after his death, but neither of these deals with the literary aspects of *Smoky Pictures*.

Among European critics, I find Grobbel's study of German Romani people, "Contemporary Romany Autobiography as Performance," very useful. His theoretical considerations are important, even though the German autobiographies he studies are very different from the narratives I study. Kati Trumpener has written about Roma narratives of Western Europe, particularly Britain. Her study centers mostly on historical observations in a culture that differs greatly from the Hungarian setting. Martin Shaw's 2006 Ph.D. dissertation, "Narrating Gypsies, Telling Travellers: A Study of the Relational Self in Four Life Stories," also concentrates on the traveling lifestyle of European Gypsies—a style of life non-existent in twentieth-century Hungary. Barbara Rose Lange's "Gender Politics and Musical Performers in the Isten Gyülekezet. A Fieldwork Account" contains very important observations about folklore, but not about narrative genres. Francis Hinde Groome has also published on Gypsy folk tales.

***The Decision to Compare These Four Texts***

A study of Wright and Hurston can be used in understanding Lakatos and Péliné because their relative positions in the culture they describe offer significant grounds for comparison. Lakatos and Péliné have written the first two Romani autobiographies in Hungary. While Wright and Hurston had behind them the tradition of slave narratives, as well as other earlier African American autobiographies, they are both considered innovative and ground-breaking reference points of twentieth-century African American autobiographies. The plots of all four books take place at around the same time, in the economically and politically burdened years preceding World War II, but this is of secondary importance to the books' significance in their cultural positions. Hurston and Wright published their works in 1942 and 1945, respectively, while the Roma narratives

appeared later, Lakatos's in 1975 and Péliné's in 1996. Nevertheless, I believe that Wright and Hurston, along with their reception, can be better used to understand these Roma writers than newer African American writings. Living in Communist Hungary, Lakatos and Péliné as authors did not have access to the global publishing industry, that featured stories of ethnic minorities or the cultural movements that took place in America and other parts of the world. African American life writings of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s build heavily on the traditions of precisely Wright and Hurston, so even if the publication dates were closer to the Roma books under study, their literary backgrounds would be very different. Of course, Wright and Hurston themselves had more of a written literary tradition to build upon than the Roma writers, but still, their groundbreaking status in the African American autobiographical tradition makes them more fit for a study of this type.

Lakatos and Péliné must be understood in their specific Eastern European and Hungarian context. The cultural, social, and literary backgrounds of the Roma must not be equated with the African American experience as it appears in Wright and Hurston. This is why my comparison between the Hungarian Roma and the African American autobiographies is not based on the similarities between cultural or social conditions, but rather on the various authorial responses they make to them. The issues I study are exactly those that can be compared in spite of the vast differences. Ghetto life, segregation, discrimination, difficult access to education, and the search for one's identity are in fact shared experiences between African Americans and Hungarian Roma. In some sense, Lakatos and Péliné write from a background that more closely resembles the circumstances of Wright and Hurston than those of other Roma writers in Europe and America. In Hungary, the Gypsy traditions of travel and other folk customs were almost

totally stifled by the time the books' plots take place, so in that sense, the settings and backgrounds are characterized by uprootedness and direct repression, aspects that are also seen in Wright and Hurston. This is where, I believe, the extensive literature on Wright and Hurston can help in better understanding Lakatos and Péliné.

I have chosen the books to include one man and one woman writer from each tradition. Wright and Hurston both lived in the South, characterized by Jim Crow laws of segregation. But while Wright emphasizes the violence and ethnic strife as he experienced it in Southern cities, Hurston's world is centered in the peaceful all-black town of Eatonville, Florida. Among the Gypsy autobiographies, Lakatos, the male writer, describes violence and ethnic strife that can be compared to the world described by Wright, even though Lakatos lived in the countryside of Eastern Hungary. Péliné's world is the opposite of Hurston's small town, as her story takes place in multi-ethnic Budapest, capital of Hungary. Nevertheless, she is similar to Hurston in that her emphasis is on racial peace and positive self-image rather than on the painful social realities described by the male authors. While my study is not centered around issues of gender, it must be noted that the affirmative re-construction of a culture is more emphatic in the female narratives, while the male authors are more centered on protest and political issues.

### ***About my Own Position***

A word must be said about my own position in studying Roma and African American writings, especially because of my emphasis on the genre of autoethnography, that, according to Carolyn Ellis, always acknowledges the emotional involvement of the writer (Ellis 30). As I do not belong to either the Roma or the African American minority, one might wonder about my choice of topic as well as about my competence in dealing

with these issues. As for my competence, my work is a study in comparative literature, in which I use the tools of literary analysis to understand written narratives as presented to the readers. Wright has written primarily for an African American readership, but the special power and appeal of his work has drawn many white readers, commentators, and critics. Hurston probably had at least one eye on her white readership, an issue for which she has received both criticism and praise. Lakatos and Péliné both addressed their narratives to the "general Hungarian" audience, primarily to acquaint people with the lives of the Roma, strangely unknown to most of the majority population. Hence, it is certainly not strange for a white Hungarian American to read these books.

In my comparative study, I look for messages about minority status that can be applicable elsewhere. As both Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston enjoy a very extensive critical literature, I do not intend to write or study their "main" message or what might be the "most important" about them, let alone giving a general interpretive reading of these books. I rather try to point out some hidden details, hitherto unnoticed features, interesting contradictions, and strange similarities that might add some new points of view to the critical literature. This is important in understanding my choice of topics and the ways in which I approach them.

My emphasis is exactly on various kinds of dialogues, of ways of understanding one's own and other cultures, which is increasingly important in a globalized world where various minority groups are more visible but not necessarily better understood. Further, a study of various issues as they appear in widely different minority groups, African Americans and Gypsy Hungarians, opens up a dialogue among the four authors, enabling the creation of what Caren Kaplan calls "transnational affiliations" (Kaplan 116). This

dialogue carefully points out differences as well as similarities in order to foster understanding and appreciation in the face of a hegemonic global capitalist regime.

Writing in 2010 and 2011, I must mention the importance of Roma issues in European politics. It is a coincidence that I write these lines during the historic time of the First European Semester, that, by coincidence, is led by a Hungarian presidency. One of the stated objectives "of the Hungarian Presidency is to have the Framework Strategy on Roma Integration adopted at the June 2011 meeting of the European Council" (Urkuti). Although my scholarly and literary undertaking, which began many years ago, does not have any political purpose, it is my admitted hope that my work will foster a better understanding and appreciation of the culture of the largest ethnic minority group in Europe. And I am convinced that understanding and appreciation form the foundation of any improvement in race relations.

Not having the personal emotional involvement in the cultures I study here, I believe I can more readily pinpoint passages and issues that invoke emotional involvement in the reader by virtue of the presented text itself. I have chosen to study issues (mothers, family relationships, violence, ways of resistance) that are all emotionally charged areas of minority life. I believe that my study will show how literature can create understanding not only by describing facts but also by eliciting emotional reactions in the reader, who might otherwise fail to notice the depth to which discrimination and prejudice can enter into the lives of minority people.

Finally, I am certainly not a distant observer of minority issues. Having been born in Hungary, I lived as an immigrant in America for many years. Besides, my family and I have close ties to many of the approximately 30% of the total Hungarian population that

live in minority status, mostly in nation states that were violently formed at the end of World War I. As globalization seems to be the current trend in world development, serving "unlikely coalitions" and "caring dialogues" (Mohanty 125) among various minority groups might provoke a way of thinking in which the very definition of minority will have to be re-written.

### **Historical, Economic, and Cultural Backgrounds**

Here, I will briefly trace the historical, cultural, and economic backgrounds out of which the Hungarian Roma and African American autobiographers of my study emerged. Besides positioning the books in their historical realities and pointing out the material and social effects that went into shaping the ways in which the four authors chose to narrate their lives, I wish to emphasize the importance of seeing clearly both the similarities and the differences that exist. Even though both Wright and Hurston wrote about growing up black in the American South during the first half of the twentieth century, it is important to note the differences in their experiences in order to fully understand their distinct approaches to portraying their lives. Similarly, while both Lakatos and Péliné wrote about growing up Roma in Hungary at around the same time, they come from very different economic and cultural backgrounds, the understanding of which helps to explain their differences. It is only by understanding the material and cultural differences that we may start making comparisons, and find what Kaplan calls for: "'new modes of affiliation' based on the 'material conditions of people themselves'" (Kaplan 121). Thus, I will emphasize the specific cultural backgrounds and differences not only between the Roma and the African American traditions, but also within both of these groups themselves.

Calling attention to the authors' complex viewpoints that sometimes include criticisms of their own cultures and people serves to avoid, in Kaplan's words, "forms of exoticization and racism" (122). Further, it is also in line with Paul John Eakin's warning that: "In sizing up autobiographies of those who are culturally marginalized by reason of class, gender, or race, we need to be careful not to repeat unwittingly in our critical practice the original injustice of domination and exclusion" (Eakin 10).

### ***The Historical Background of the Roma Authors***

The Gypsies, or Roma, entered Eastern Europe during the middle ages (Crowe xi). They probably left their land in present-day India in the ninth and tenth centuries, and began a wandering lifestyle, similarly to many other groups of people at the time (Külügyminisztérium). Their first confirmed appearance in Hungary is dated to the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, as they were probably moving around Eastern Europe, many tribes heading towards the West as well (Külügyminisztérium). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, most of Hungary was occupied by the Turkish (Ottoman) empire, which seems to have accorded different status for the Roma than in other parts of Europe. According to György Rostás-Farkas, the Roma enjoyed certain privileges:

The constant battles and the partitioning of the country into interest zones were not conducive to the establishment of stability in the country. While the wandering tribes were seen as a threat to the established order in Western Europe, in Hungary, they could be put into the service of military aims, such as obtaining intelligence and spying. (Rostás-Farkas 120)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Az állandó harcok, az ország szétszakítása, nem adtak lehetőséget a belső nyugalmi helyzet kialakulására. Ezek a vándorló cigány törzsek Nyugaton megzavarták a nyugalmat, de a törökök által megszállt területeken alkalmasnak bizonyultak hírszerzésre, vagy egyéb hadi célokra" (Rostás 120).

According to Külügyminisztérium, the Turkish occupation of Hungary helped the Roma to develop certain crafts that came to define much of their role in the country's workforce for centuries to come:

The constant military alert and a lack of other artisans meant jobs for the Roma. Working on fortifying and building forts, doing metalwork, making and maintaining weaponry, trading horses, offering cheap woodcraft and blacksmith services, and carrying the mail were not only sources of income for the Roma but also essential services rendered to the country. (Külügyminisztérium 2)<sup>2</sup>

David M. Crowe's studies seem to contradict these observations, as he sees an increased suspicion toward the Roma during Turkish occupation. He states that Gypsy people at this time

were increasingly seen as spies and something of a Turkish fifth column, which caused them to be increasingly subjected to restrictions on their lifestyle and trade. Though still valued for their smithing skills, particularly by the military, these efforts to regulate the Roma eventually forced them to adopt a nomadic way of life. (Crowe xi)

It is not my purpose here to enter into this historical debate, but there are certain things to be observed that are relevant to understanding Gypsy culture and literature. It seems clear that even during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there existed contradictory attitudes towards them and they were a heterogeneous minority group. Moreover, it seems certain that, in Rostás's words, "their situation in Hungary was not as bad as in other countries in Europe" (Rostás-Farkas 120)<sup>3</sup>. Crowe notes that enslavement and abuse were widespread in areas to the east of Hungary, for example in Wallachia and Moldavia, where "the practice of Gypsy slavery evolved into an abusive system that treated the

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<sup>2</sup> "Az állandó hadi készülődés, a kézművesek hiánya munkaalkalmat jelentett számukra. Az erődítési, építkezési munkák, a fémművesség, a fegyvergyártás és karbantartás, a lókereskedés, a céhes kézműveseknél olcsóbb fafaragás és kovácsolás, a postaszolgálat nemcsak megélhetési forrásul szolgált, hanem az ország szempontjából is fontos tevékenységnek bizonyult" (Külügyminisztérium 2).

<sup>3</sup> "Magyarországon a helyzet nem volt olyan rossz, mint a többi európai országban" (Rostás 120).

Roma as no more than cattle" (Crowe xii). Neither was there the open hostility resulting in wanton killings such as in Prussian territories (Crowe xii).

Of even more relevance to the twentieth century are the unique treatments of Roma in the Habsburg-led Austro-Hungarian empire during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Crowe reports "particularly harsh" (Crowe xiii) policies towards the Roma during the early years of Habsburg rule. Rostás-Farkas also sees an initial worsening: "After the end of the Turkish occupation, as the country's life began to settle down, the wandering lifestyle of Gypsies began to be held in suspicion, and slowly, anti-Roma sentiments began to emerge" (Rostás-Farkas 121).<sup>4</sup> In order to control this situation, the Empress Maria Theresia, and her son and successor, Emperor Joseph II, issued various orders to regulate Roma life:

In 1761, Maria Theresia issued an order that Gypsies settle down. She ordered the landowners to issue plots of land for the Gypsies and treat them as serfs. She forbade the use of the term 'Gypsy', and made mandatory the term 'New Hungarian.' She demanded that attitudes of patience and compliance be exhibited towards the New Hungarians. In this way, she wanted to make them get used to work and settled lifestyles. (Rostás-Farkas 122)<sup>5</sup>

These policies, that Crowe describes as "more enlightened, humane efforts" (Crowe xiii), were directed primarily towards assimilating the Roma people into the newly reorganized society. When it seemed that assimilation did not come as easily as hoped, more radical and less humane steps were taken. The empress "placed limitations on the marriages of Gypsies, and then ordered the taking away of Gypsy children from their parents, placing

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<sup>4</sup> "A török kiűzése után, amint a belső helyzet kezdett megszilárdulni, szembetűnővé vált a cigány törzsek kóbor életmódja, s lassan fokozódott a cigányellenes hangulat" (Rostás 121).

<sup>5</sup> "Mária Terézia 1761-ben rendelkezést bocsát ki a cigányok letelepítéséről. Ebben kötelezi a földesurakat, hogy birtokaikon jobbágytelket és házhelyet adjanak a cigányoknak, s azokat úgy kezeljék, mint saját jobbágyaikat. Megtiltja a cigány név használatát, és kötelezően írja elő az 'új magyar' kifejezést. Előzékenység és türelmesség tanúsítását rendeli el az új magyarokkal szemben. Így akarta velük megkedveltetni a munkát, és a helyhez kötött életmódot" (Rostás 122).

children with bourgeois or peasant families" (Külügyminisztérium 2)<sup>6</sup>. In 1783, Emperor Joseph II forbade the use of the Gypsy language. Again, sources seem to disagree as to the efficacy of these efforts to assimilate the Roma into Hungarian society. According to Crowe, "these efforts faded quickly after the death of Maria Theresia's son and successor, Joseph II, in 1790. The empire's Gypsies now returned to their traditional lifestyle, or went elsewhere" (Crowe xii-xiii). Rostás also states that the measures "of Maria Theresia and Joseph II remained ineffective. After their deaths, no one dealt with the Gypsy issue on a national level" (Rostás-Farkas 136)<sup>7</sup>. But according to Külügyminisztérium, the attempts at Roma assimilation had profound effects on Gypsy life:

The forceful assimilation was basically successful. The majority of the Gypsies, after having lived in Hungary for hundreds of years while maintaining their own culture and customs, gave up their language by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and became part of Hungarian society. The majority made their living as smiths, blacksmiths, wood carvers, and bricklayers ... The best opportunities for social acceptance were, however, for musicians. (Külügyminisztérium 2)<sup>8</sup>

From the point of view of understanding the writings of Péliné and Lakatos, the most important effect of these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century regulations was the introduction of even more divisions within the Hungarian Roma population by the twentieth century. In 1873, a census of the Roma put their total number at 272,776 (Rostás-Farkas 138). This census divided the Gypsies into three categories: the "permanently settled ones" numbered the most, 243,432; the "pretty much settled" amounted to about 20,406 individuals, but there were 8938 so-called "wandering

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<sup>6</sup> "Később korlátokat állított a cigányok házasságkötése elé, majd elrendelte a gyerekek elvételét a cigány szülőktől, hogy őket azután 'polgári vagy paraszti' családban neveljék fel" (Külügyminisztérium 2).

<sup>7</sup> "Mária Terézia és II. József rendeletei hatástalanok maradtak. Az ő haláluk után nem foglalkoztak intézményesen a cigányokkal" (Rostás 136).

<sup>8</sup> "Az erőszakos asszimiláció lényegében sikeresnek bizonyult: a XIX. és a XX. század során a több száz éve betelepült, szokásai és kultúráját sokáig megőrző cigányság döntő többsége feladta, sőt elfelejtette anyanyelvét, és betagozódtott a magyar társadalomba. Jelentős részük a megélhetést biztosító kovács, szegkovács, fafaragó, vályogvető foglalkozást művelte ... Leginkább azonban a zenélés révén kaptak lehetőséget a társadalmi felemelkedésre" (Külügyminisztérium 2).

Gypsies" (Rostás-Farkas 138). Külügyminisztérium mentions that the Gypsies affected by the assimilation orders of Maria Theresia are called "romungro," meaning Hungarian Roma. But there are two other distinct groups of Roma in Hungary: the "Olah (Romanian) Gypsies," and the "beas Gypsies." Both of these groups entered Hungary from the direction of Romania after the assimilation efforts just described, and their lifestyles and language are necessarily different. The "Olah Gypsies" speak the Lovari, or Gypsy, language, while the "beas Gypsies" speak an archaic version of the Romanian language.

Besides these divisions of culture and origins, there were great differences among Gypsies based on their jobs. In the twentieth century, the greatest divide was among the following three groups: musician Gypsies, who were well respected and sometimes well paid; artisans, such as smiths; and those who did not have steady work. Crowe notes that "those Roma who had marketable skills and used them to create successful, assimilated lifestyles soon became a caste unto themselves often far removed from the harsh lifestyles of their poorer kinsmen" (Crowe xiv). In a 1913 study, Antal Hermann emphasized that in Temesvár (a major Hungarian city at the time), there were "no problems" with the settled Gypsies. "The musician Gypsies live normal, bourgeois lives ... the older Gypsy families consider themselves citizens of the city and refuse to be taken for Gypsies" (Dupcsik 89-90).<sup>9</sup> The respect for Gypsy musicians is shown by, for example, the famous (and often criticized) statement of Franz Liszt, "who was deeply affected by their music and culture [and] saw the Gypsies as the creators of Hungarian

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<sup>9</sup> "'A temesvári letelepedett cigányokkal nincs nagyobb baj.' A muzsikus cigányok egyenesen 'rendes polgári életet élnek.' 'A számbavétel még külön megjegyzi, hogy a régebben letelepedett cigánycsaládok ivadékai városi polgároknak vallják magukat és tiltakoznak az ellen, hogy őket cigányoknak tekintsék'" (Dupcsik 89-90).

national music" (Crowe xiii). These differences divided the Gypsies among themselves, creating rifts and suspicions: "The city musician Gypsies sneer at (and do not even talk to) the silent, withdrawn ... village dweller Gypsies, who speak Romanian and dress in simple, gray clothes" (Dupcsik 110).<sup>10</sup>

In the first half of the twentieth century, "the situation of Hungarian Roma ... got progressively worse"<sup>11</sup> (Dupcsik 85). This worsening of the situation was primarily a result of economic instability and neglect, along with a progressively increasing racism, that ended in the "Roma Holocaust" during World War II. Dupcsik explains that as the number of people in the countryside decreased and they became increasingly poor, the traditional occupations of the Roma became less sought after. Moreover only one in five or six Roma children attended school (Ernő Kállai 2). It is, therefore, clear that "even if their surroundings had been free of all prejudice, the economic conditions of the Roma would still have continuously worsened in this half of the century" (Dupcsik 97).<sup>12</sup>

But besides the economic need, discrimination also prevailed. The stereotype of Gypsies stealing became widespread already in the nineteenth century, even though most of the population did not consider them particularly dangerous. At that time, most people associated gypsies with stealing, but, showing signs of "enlightenment," rejected earlier notions of "man-eating" and "kidnapping" gypsies (Dupcsik 86-87). At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, notions of the Gypsies as thieves increased, and even more serious crimes, including robberies and murders, were attributed to them (Dupcsik

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<sup>10</sup> "A városi muzsikusk cigányok nagyon lenézik (szóba sem állnak velük) a hallgatag, félrevonult, külön csoportokat alkotó, egyszerű, szürke rongyokba bujtatott környékbeli, falusi, teknővájó, bádogos, oláhul beszélő (cigányul nem is tudó) kolompár cigányokat" (Dupcsik 110).

<sup>11</sup> "A magyarországi romák helyzete a 19-20. század fordulójától kezdve fokozatosan egyre rosszabb lett" (Dupcsik 85).

<sup>12</sup> "Még ha környezetük teljesen előítélet-mentes lett volna, a romák gazdasági helyzete akkor is folyamatosan romlott volna ebben a fél évszázadban" (Dupcsik 97).

86-87). This was in spite of the fact that statistics actually show fewer crimes committed by Roma than their numbers in the population would warrant. Thus, though not too many crimes were actually proven to be committed by Gypsies, a ministry order of 1928, for example, ordered the local police to undertake "round-ups at least once every year, during which wandering Gypsies can be rounded up in the neighborhoods"<sup>13</sup> (Dupcsik 103). Examples of such round-ups are shown in Lakatos's book, for example, when he is chased away from "Gypsy Paris."

As Hitler's influence grew in Eastern Europe during the 1930s, his views on race influenced the way in which Roma were perceived. Dupcsik describes how, beginning with the 1930s, "the Gypsy question" shifted from issues of "crime" and "plague" to issues of race, with many strategists attempting to link these issues with the more publicized "Jewish question" (Dupcsik 140). Many Gypsies from the countries of Eastern Europe were deported to the concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau (Dupcsik 142). Crowe writes that "Whatever the Roma of Eastern Europe and Russia had suffered earlier, nothing prepared them for the horrors of the Porajmos or Gypsy holocaust between 1933 and 1945" (Crowe xiv), clearly attributing these developments to Adolf Hitler and his Nazi henchmen.

Fortunately, however, there was no time for systematic genocide of Gypsies in Hungary because when the deportations officially started in 1944, the Russian troops had already occupied Eastern Hungary, and the rest of the country was in chaos as well. "Roma in Hungary and the rump state of Slovakia were spared from the worst genocidal indignities until Germany occupied both countries in 1944" (Crowe xiv-xv). However,

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<sup>13</sup> "legalább évente tartanak razziákat, amelyek során előállítják a területükön található kóbor cigányokat" (Dupcsik 103).

there are records of many local atrocities and deportations (see Dupcsik 134, 142). The number of Hungarian Roma killed during these pogroms is uncertain. Some estimate the number to be around 50,000, but Dupcsik, based on census data, calculates it to be around 15,000.

In light of the above-mentioned historical and social issues, it is important to position the two Roma autobiographies under study. Lakatos and Péliné came from two very different Roma traditions in Hungary, having different cultural, economic, and social experiences. Nevertheless, they were both grappling with their identities, and attempting to write their autobiographies in a way that would portray an ethnographic image to readers of the majority society.

Menyhért Lakatos was born in 1926, near Vésztő, a small village near the Romanian border. He grew up in a Gypsy enclosure near the village, the inhabitants of which made their living by undertaking temporary agricultural jobs. His family originated from Romania, speaking the Gypsy language (Lovari). Thus, he belonged to the group that is often referred to as "Oláh Cigány" or "Romanian Gypsy." His father still had horses and attempted to trade with them, according to family tradition. Lakatos emphasizes that his grandparents and their ancestors used to wander around from north to south, probably in areas east of Hungary (present day Romania, Ukraine, and Poland). He includes Gypsy words in his narrative, and several times alludes to the fact that he was conversant in that language, sometimes even using it as a "secret language" inaccessible to the Hungarian people around (such as the police). His friend, Bada, exemplifies the old traditions of wandering and trading with horses, as he goes to Romania to steal and smuggle horses into Hungary. But Lakatos uses the character of Bada and his ancestors to

also emphasize the contrast between what some people (Roma and non-Roma) perceive as "typical" wandering Gypsy lifestyles and the realities of their lives as settled agricultural workers. Living in poverty in a poor rural area of Hungary, Lakatos experienced the worst fate of the Roma, beset by poverty, disease, and hopelessness, and subjected to the whims of local authorities. It is very important to note that there is no direct mention in the book of any distinctions among the various groups of Roma in Hungary. This was because Lakatos did not want to emphasize differences among Roma: rather, he worked on creating a unified culture and appreciation. Upon Lakatos's death, Sándor Hegedüs characterized him as a figure "for the Lovari" (referring to his "Olah Gypsy" origin), only to immediately describe him as "a leading figure of the entirety of the Hungarian Roma population"<sup>14</sup> (Hegedüs 1).

Péliné was born in 1924 in the capital city, Budapest, and grew up there. She describes the lives of "music Gypsies in [Buda]pest" (Durst 62). She belonged to the group of "romungros," Gypsies who speak Hungarian. As musicians, her family sometimes made quite a good amount of money—for example, when her brothers went to work in Paris. Moreover, they were appreciated by their audience and usually tolerated, sometimes even respected, by their Hungarian neighbors. In spite of all this, poverty is the main source of difficulties in the life of the family, particularly after the father becomes bed-ridden. Much of Péliné's narrative is about how they moved to better or to worse rented apartments according to their financial circumstances. Nevertheless, following literary traditions in Hungary, Péliné also valorizes poverty as a force that made people stick together and help each other in times of need. She describes a "multiethnic" Budapest of Germans, Jews, Hungarians, and Roma, all of whom lived in

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<sup>14</sup> "Lakatos Menyhért az egész hazai cigány irodalom vezéralakja volt" (Hegedüs 1).

harmony below a certain line of poverty. There are not too many openly racial incidents in her book, but unlike poverty, racial problems have no "redeeming qualities" at all.

Judit Durst has collected comments on the book, and most commentators agree that the image she portrays is not a "generally true" image of the Roma. While Ágnes Daróczi states that "Even though the community she describes is a Hungarian Roma community, many things mentioned are true of other Roma groups as well"<sup>15</sup> (qtd in Durst 62), others are more critical of the Roma image she presents. One commentator quoted by Durst believes that Péliné portrayed herself according to what she believed her Hungarian readers would expect: "I knew Hilda. She did not use to speak like this with other Gypsies. She uses bad language and Gypsy words only when she wants to cast a Roma image for the *gadjos*" (qtd in Durst 65).<sup>16</sup> Another commentator, Tivadar Fátyol, links Lakatos and Péliné in what he perceives as an overly simplified Roma image created by both of their books:

Aunt Hilda, that dear old lady, lied quite a lot in that book ... It had one negative effect: the Hungarians accepted this as *the* Gypsy world. But the life of Gypsy musicians is much more colorful and complex than what is portrayed in the book. ... But neither is Menyhért Lakatos's portrayal of the Gypsy world in *Smoky Pictures* accurate. The problem is not that Hungarians get to know these arbitrary images of Gypsy life, but that they conclude that this is what it means to be GYPSY. But the world of Gypsies is much more complex than either Menyhért's or Hilda's portrayal. (qtd in Durst 62)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "Függetlenül attól, hogy a bemutatott közösség egy magyar cigány közösség, a többi roma csoportra is nagyon sok minden vonatkozik belőle" (Durst 62).

<sup>16</sup> "Ami nagyon zavaró a könyvben, az a csúnya beszéd. Én ismertem a Hildát, a Hilda a cigányokkal nem beszélt csúnyán. Amikor velem beszélgetett, nem jöttek elő ezek a csúnya szavak. Abban a pillanatban azonban, ahogy a gádzsók felé közvetíteni akar valamit, elkezd csúnyán beszélni, cigánykodni" (Durst 65).

<sup>17</sup> "A Hilda néni, egyem a drága szívét, elég sokat kamuzott abban a könyvben. ... De azért volt negatív hatása is a regénynek: a magyarok úgy fogadták el, hogy ez a cigány világ. Pedig nem, ennél sokkal színesebb, többértűbb a muzsikás cigányok élete... És nem is az a cigány világ, amit például a Lakatos Menyhért megírt a *Füstös képek*ben. Nem az a baj, hogy megismerik ezt a világot, csak az a baj, hogy azt hiszik, ez a CIGÁNY. Pedig sem az, amit a Menyhért írt, sem az, amit a Hilda mond - ennél sokkal többértűbb a cigányok világa" (Durst 62).

In her study of Péliné's book, Durst does not fail to emphasize the heterogeneous character of Roma society, stating that "[v]arious groups of Gypsies separate from each other even more distinctly than from gadjos" (Durst 65).<sup>18</sup> Tivadar Fátyol describes these divisions in extreme terms, that would indeed not fit either Lakatos's or Péliné's narrative:

Years ago, our ancestors found it unthinkable to talk with Olah Gypsies ... They hated Olah Gypsies much more than gadjos. When I was small, they used to frighten me with them. My father used to say, 'if you are bad, I'll give you to the Olah Gypsy woman.' They did not say that the gadjo would take me. If we talk with somebody, and want to express that the other is saying something we don't like, we usually say, 'Oh, don't be an Olah Gypsy.' (qtd in Durst 65)<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, Péliné does mention some similar divisions among the Roma in Budapest—for example, when her mother says: "We are a good musician family. I will not let my son marry into an Olah Gypsy family" (26).<sup>20</sup> It is, therefore, very important to keep in mind throughout my study that Lakatos and Péliné represent two different images of a culture and two different points of view relating to that culture. Reading them together helps avoiding the pitfalls Fátyol (to "conclude that this is what it means to be GYPSY") and Kaplan ("forms of exoticization") warn against, and contributes to an appreciation of the complexity and heterogeneity of Roma life in Hungary.

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<sup>18</sup> "a különböző cigány csoportok egymástól szinte még jobban elkülönülnek, mint a gádzsóktól" (Durst 65).

<sup>19</sup> "Évekkel ezelőtt az őseink még elképzelhetetlennek tartották, hogy oláh cigányokkal szóba álljunk. (...) Százszor inkább az oláh cigányt vetették meg, mint a gádzsót. Mikor kicsi voltam, azokkal ijesztgettek. Apám azt mondta: ha rosszkodsz, odaadlak az oláh cigányasszonynak. Nem azt mondták, hogy elvisz a gádzsó. Sőt, mi is, ha beszélgetünk valakivel, és az illető olyat mond, ami nem tetszik, akkor azt szoktuk mondani: jól van, ne oláh cigánykodjál már!" (Durst 65).

<sup>20</sup> "Mi jó muzsikuscsalád vagyunk, hát pont engedném, hogy egy ilyen udvarozó oláh cigány családba menjen a fiam?" (26).

### *The Historical Background of the African American Authors*

Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright were both born in the American South at a time that has been termed the "Decades of Disappointment" for African Americans, after the few hopeful years of Reconstruction following the Civil War:

Random violence and systematic oppression were supported by Jim Crow laws, which legalized racial segregation in virtually every area of life. The last part of the nineteenth century and the first few years of the twentieth became known in African American history as the 'Decades of Disappointment' or, as black scholar Rayford Logan termed it, 'the Nadir of Black Experience' (Gates and McKay 464).

But this is not to say that things improved after the first decade of the twentieth century. Jennifer Lynn Ritterhouse explains that "black southerners continued to face economic and political oppression, as well as the humiliations of racial etiquette and other hardships" (27) in the South throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Among other facts, this is evidenced by the situation that 1.5 million left the South in the 1940s, where, in spite of three decades of departures, 80 percent of all African Americans lived in 1940.

Richard Wright was born near Roxie, Mississippi in 1908. His father was a tenant farmer and his mother was a schoolteacher. His father left the family when Richard was a small child. Economic difficulties might have influenced his behavior, as he seems to have been a victim of the southern depression and natural disasters of 1914, in which "Black tenant farmers were plunged further into debt, and laborers saw their daily wages decrease to seventy-five cents a day and below" (Gates and McKay 467). So, the extreme poverty and hunger that Wright portrays in his autobiography are certainly not exaggerated, and it is unlikely that his family would have had much better economic conditions if his father had stayed with them. His abandonment of the family,

nevertheless, increased the family's plight, as the mother was trying to support them with help from family members, most notably his strict and exacting grandmother. She and other family members belonged to the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, one of the "diverse set of African American institutions" (Gates and McKay 466) that prospered and tried in their own ways to make life more bearable. As the mother's health and energy dwindled, the family lived in more and more extreme poverty. Most of the time they lived in Southern cities, such as Jackson or Natchez, Mississippi. Wright had thus experienced racial segregation, poverty, hunger, racial violence, extreme religious tenets, and family feuds early in his life.

Hurston puts her birth at 1901, but records show she was born in 1891, a discrepancy scholars have not yet been able to explain. She spent her first nine years in the all-black rural town of Eatonville, Florida, where her early childhood experiences did not involve much contact with white people.

An extraordinary place by any reckoning, Hurston's hometown takes on an almost mythic quality in her fiction and autobiographical writing. In her view, the absence of whites not only kept Eatonville free of racism but also freed blacks to express themselves without reservation. She was also proud of her father's crucial role as mayor of and lawgiver to the town. (Gates and McKay 997)

After her mother's death at the age of nine, she moved to the city of Jacksonville, which "made me know I was a little colored girl" (Hurston 70), and she spent the rest of her youth wandering around the South, moving from place to place in search of jobs and education.

Thus, we can see that even though they were born at around the same time and wrote their autobiographies at around the same time, Hurston's and Wright's original experiences of poverty, race, and family were widely different. This could help to explain the reason why they chose to emphasize such very different aspects of Southern life.

This South was characterized by racial tensions and violence. Segregation became entrenched by the time Wright and Hurston were born, most notably with the important U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 that endorsed separation in transportation (Gates and McKay 190). Legal segregation and racial violence mutually reinforced each other. "As legal segregation made living conditions for blacks in the South more and more intolerable, the widespread lynching of blacks bitterly underscored the extent to which they were powerless before the law and less than human in the eyes of many whites" (Gates and McKay 190). Ritterhouse reports of 4,715 lynchings between 1889 and 1942. These horrible events sometimes included torture and burning alive, and they were frequently advertised beforehand so as to attract a large number of white spectators.

But violence had effects beyond its horrible deeds. Melissa Walker explains how racial violence always loomed over the lives of Southern blacks, influencing their everyday behavior:

Neil McMillen has called violence 'the instrument in reserve,' and Johnson noted that lynching in particular had profound psychological consequences for young blacks. ... As white Texan Martha Emmons put it, 'I don't remember and out-and-out lynching any time in Mansfield, but oh, they all always had that idea that it could be done all right.'" (Walker, Melissa 96).

In this way, the presence of violence looming over the lives of African American people served to develop modes of behavior that amounted to a "racial etiquette." Historian Grace Elizabeth Hale characterizes this as follows: "because southern black inferiority could not be assumed, southern whites created a social order in which black inferiority would be constantly 'performed'" (Hale 85). Peter Coclanis and Bryant Simon describe living in the Jim Crow South as a "carefully choreographed affair:"

Everyone had a part to play and every line and every gesture was scripted. African Americans were supposed to be poor and look like it; they were told to remove their hats whenever they spoke to a white man; they were taught to move off sidewalks when whites passed; they were told to use the back door of white homes, never the front; and they were instructed to address whites as Boss or Mr. and Mrs. (Coclanis and Simon 203)

This social order of etiquette varied in kind and intensity from place to place, so blacks had to be very careful of their behavior. Whites made sure that "rituals of daily contact reinforced black inferiority" (Walker, Melissa 85), but while children sometimes could use the first names in addressing whites, the same thing, if done by adults, would warrant violence. Wright himself describes his difficulties in learning how to "act black," and his amazement at how his friends had gotten used to behaving in humiliating ways. But, as Ritterhouse explains, they had no other choice since about 50 percent of all lynchings "involved 'racial etiquette,' that is, modes of formal behavior" (Ritterhouse 36).

As there was no possibility for open protest, African Americans often turned to other forms of clever resistance. Coclanis and Simon provide many examples to demonstrate modes of subtle resistance, that included time-tested methods of slow work, vandalism, or playing dumb. But in many cases, far from being dumb, these modes of resistance required clever thinking and tricks, as they explain:

On the streets and in town, African Americans launched other kinds of protests against the South's racial order. ... Deploying the weapons of the weak, African Americans defied these unwritten but still closely adhered to rules. They went out in public in fancy clothes, 'accidentally' bumped into whites on sidewalks, and called themselves Mr. and Mrs. One family named their daughter 'Mis Julia' reportedly to make sure that whites would address her with polite respect. (Coclanis and Simon 203)

Another side of this resistance, according to Coclanis and Simon, was the control African Americans exercised over their own lives and bodies in situations that could not be directly controlled by any of the methods of racial etiquette. These included visible

demonstrations of cultural uniqueness, strength, and power: "On Saturday nights, however, black women and men took control over their time and their bodies. At rural bars, juke joints, and house parties they shook, sang, danced, gambled, drank, and boogied (Coclanis and Simon 203).

In spite of oppression's looming presence all of Southern life, it must be emphasized that the differences Hurston and Wright represented in their writings are indeed present in their backgrounds. In the country, "The lines between the races were as fluid as the lines between town and country, far more fluid than racial boundaries in the South's big cities" (Walker, Melissa 83), as there were no streetcars, buses, hotels, or restaurants where the races might mingle and be forced to separate. In the country, places of contact were less confrontational, on farms, retail establishments, and in separated railroad cars. In the countryside, much more so than in cities, "Children of both races played together when young and often ate together" (Walker, Melissa 88). And local variations are very important to emphasize:

Even the practice of sharing water jugs in the fields varied from place to place. ... As Downing's experience suggests, in the countryside, racial boundaries were more flexible in 'private' settings such as farms than in 'public situations' where a white person's status might have been compromised or where his commitment to the Jim Crow system might have been called into question if he tolerated excessive familiarity between the races. (Walker, Melissa 89)

We must, therefore, understand that even though Wright and Hurston grew up and wrote about the same "Jim Crow" South as just described, regional and personal variations in race relations and economic conditions made them experience these in different ways. Hurston's first relatively well-to-do nine years in her isolated rural town of Eatonville, along with her few positive experiences with white people (such as the man who helped her to get born), made her emphasize cultural values and positive race

relations even in the face of what she later must have seen in terms of discrimination and injustice. Wright, on the other hand, experienced extreme poverty, racial humiliation and violence on a large scale throughout his youth. This is why his emphasis was always more on protest fiction. Gates and McKay explain that his turn to the "'nourishing' formula of Marxism and social protest" originates from these economic experiences, but the writing style originates from

the didactic, declamatory utterances found in the black sermon and historically linked to the narratives of enslavement. In other words, although Wright defied his grandmother's Seventh-Day Adventist religion (...), he was wed no less to the Protestant passions of testifying and truth telling in his portrait of a young modern man alienated in the city. (Gates and McKay 1321)

In light of these discussions, we can see that reading Wright and Hurston together can again help in understanding the complexities and contradictions of the societies in which they lived, opening the way for a thorough understanding of the depth and intricacies of their personal responses.

### *Some Notes on Terminology*

The terms Gypsy (or rather, its Hungarian "equivalent", *cigány*) and Roma are both used in Hungary. Roma is considered more polite by some, but many people (including Gypsy organizations) prefer *cigány*, saying that Roma is "too PC" and its wide use itself makes the term *cigány* sound increasingly pejorative. The Hungarian word *cigány* comes from the Greek word *atsiganos*, meaning a "heretic sect." The Latin equivalent is *ciganus*, the German is *Zigeuner*. This denomination originates from the tenth or eleventh century, and, its meaning is certainly pejorative. But many consider it their traditional name, thus holding onto it. The English term "Gypsy" comes, of course, from the term "Egyptian" as they were thought to be Egyptian pilgrims in some parts of

Western Europe. The term "Roma" simply means "man" in the Lovari language, so it is not really a proper term for an ethnic minority, either. Lakatos uses *cigány* throughout, only using the term *roma* in his few expressions that are in Roma language. Péliné also primarily uses the term *cigány*, even though there are a few occasions when she seems to use *roma* as a synonym for *cigány*. Capitalization is also an interesting question. In Hungarian, names of nationalities are never capitalized, but in English they are. "Black" is generally not capitalized in English, but African American, of course, is. In line with current usage, I will use Gypsy and Roma interchangeably, capitalizing both.

The term *gadjo*, is a Roma term for non-Roma. It is not considered pejorative. Sometimes non-Roma are referred to as "Hungarian" (*magyar*) in both books, but this is done very infrequently. As Hungary used to contain many ethnic minorities, using *magyar* instead of *gadjo* would seem to eliminate Germans, Jews, Slovaks, and others. On the other hand, using *magyar* in an inclusive sense, referring to all Hungarian citizens, would then have to include Gypsies as well. The term *white*, or its Hungarian equivalent, is never used in the books, and to this day, it is hardly ever used to distinguish non-Roma from Roma in Hungary. Moreover, beginning with the eighteenth century, Gypsies were sometimes referred to as new-Hungarians (new-magyars), but this term is never used in either book. The term peasant (*paraszt*) means anybody working on the land, but (especially in an urban setting) also has a pejorative connotation in Hungarian, referring to a stupid or backward person. This is significant in Péliné only, as she is sometimes referred to by that name in her family. In Hungarian, it is the convention to put one's family name first and given names later. Lakatos is the family name and Menyhért is the given name. In the case of Péliné, Péliné is her husband's name, Nyári is her maiden

name, and Hilda is her given name. In the English text, however, I will refer to the Hungarian authors as Menyhért Lakatos and Hilda Péliné Nyári.

In order to constantly call attention to the differences between the authors and the heroes in these autobiographies, or "life writings," I will stick to the following conventions. When writing about the authors, I will use the last names: Wright, Lakatos, Hurston, Péliné. When referring to the main characters (at any stage of their development), I will use the first names, with the exception of Lakatos, whose hero will be referred to by the last name he gives himself in his narrative: Richard, Boncza, Zora, Hilda. Of course, this distinction will be made with attention not to reduce the autobiographic character into a binary opposition between the author and the hero.

## **Theories of Autobiography and Autoethnography in Reference to the Four Texts**

### ***The African American Tradition of Autobiography***

I have chosen four autobiographies for my comparative study of African American and Roma Hungarian writings because of the generally acclaimed importance of autobiography for African American literature. In "The Site of Memory," African American author Toni Morrison writes "that a very large part of [her] own literary heritage is the autobiography. In this country the print origins of black literature (as distinguished from the oral origins) were slave narratives" (Morrison 103). A similar primacy of autobiography is voiced by William L. Andrews, who states that "autobiography holds a position of priority, many would say preeminence, among the narrative traditions of black America" (Andrews 197). In what follows, I will first briefly mention some of critics who characterized Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston as

writing in the tradition of slave narratives and initiating twentieth-century African American autobiographical traditions. Next, I will look at some more recent developments in the study of autobiographies, and show how they led me to formulate my findings with the help of studies of autoethnography and recent multinational feminist theories.

In 1974, Stephen Butterfield stated that "Richard Wright's *Black Boy* is the autobiography most worth reading of all the works of its kind in American literature" (Butterfield 155). He traces the "qualities that make *Black Boy* great" to slave narratives, most importantly to Frederick Douglass, noting that in Wright

all the elements of slave narrative structure are present: self-taught literacy, education as a means to understand a brutal environment, resistance that preserves one's integrity and goals as individual human being, inability to fit the mold of slave, anger and bitter discontent, the journey to the North, active group politics, and movement up the social scale. (Butterfield 156)

Most importantly, however, Butterfield stresses the importance of Wright's "identity as a writer and a free human being" (167). Butterfield suggests that Wright, like Douglass before him, "wrested" his identity from an oppressive "system that was determined to withhold" it. With this, Butterfield suggests that Richard's qualities in *Black Boy* enable him to attain a sense of self and individuality equal to whites in spite of his oppressed minority position.

In the early 1980s, most critics of African American autobiographies also concentrated on issues of self-definition, adding that "wresting" one's individuality is not enough, rather, self-creation is necessary, in A. Robert Lee's formulation, "in the face of that self's historic denial" (Lee 154). Lee located in Frederick Douglass's slave narrative a background for African American autobiographies, focusing primarily on "concerns

about self" (Lee 151), self-definition, and self-representation, acts that had normally been denied to slaves. He writes the following:

Its confessional format, its identifying iconography and motifs—not least the journey from darkness to light—inscribe a crucial process of black self-becoming, the self recreating its identity in precisely the way a literary text itself is edited and composed. Douglass's double act of defiance, thereby, the escape itself and the very style in which he makes account of that escape, are to be seen as having laid down track for nearly all subsequent Afro-American autobiography. (Lee 152-3)

It is very important that Lee sees not only Richard Wright but also Zora Neale Hurston (along with Chester Himes) in this tradition of "refinding and remaking of a usable language of self, both in individual terms and in the name of larger Afro-America" (Lee 155), they being the beginners of "modern Afro-American autobiography" (Lee 159). In 1983, Gordon O. Taylor similarly pointed out that the particularity of African American autobiographies is their "voicing [of] black self-consciousness so as to create it, or to recreate it in the context of twentieth-century America" (Taylor 42). In Taylor's formulation, the autobiographical act in African American life narratives is a "reinitiation" rather than a simple "reflection," a "trajection" rather than a "tracing" of life. "It is an effort to establish a voice in which to speak oneself into being" (Taylor 42).

All of these critics operated with notions of unified (Western) selves and individuality, and credited African American autobiographers for attaining these in spite of their disadvantaged positions. More recent scholarship, however, has suggested the importance of looking at the limitations of traditional genres, and thus not expecting oppressed minority subjects to make heroic efforts to formulate these mainstream definitions of the self. Recently, the critical emphasis is rather on opening up possibilities for dialogues among people of very different backgrounds, including different concepts of self, community, and culture.

*About the Genres in Light of More Recent Scholarship*

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001) carefully distinguish among the genres of life writing, life narrative, and autobiography:

We understand *life writing* as a general term for writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or an explicit self-reference to the writer. We understand *life narrative* as a somewhat narrower term that includes many kinds of self-referential writing, including autobiography ... Life narrative, then, might best be approached as a moving target, a set of ever-shifting self-referential practices that engage the past in order to reflect on identity in the present. ... *Autobiography*, by contrast, is a term for a particular practice of life narrative that emerged in the Enlightenment and has become canonical in the West. While *autobiography* is the most widely used and most generally understood term for life narrative, it is also a term that has been vigorously challenged in the wake of postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the Enlightenment subject. (Smith and Watson 5-6)

From the point of view of my study, these distinctions are important because all four narratives necessarily break the generic limits of the traditional autobiography, as they grapple to express experiences that are often incomparable to what is portrayed in conventional autobiographies. For this reason, I find it important to briefly mention the works of Jacques Derrida and other postmodern thinkers who question the limits of genres, in particular the genre of autobiography. In the following quotation, Derrida raises questions concerning issues of belonging to genres:

Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres: yet such participation never amounts to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic, and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the trait of participation itself. (Derrida 65)

Derrida explains that applying genres necessarily raises limits, that is, conditions writers to writing according to certain expectations. Theorists of autobiographical writings have been encouraged to look beyond these limits and understand autobiographical writings

without the limitations imposed by traditional genre groupings. Derrida explains these limits as follows:

'As soon as the word 'genre' is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind: 'Do,' 'Do not' says 'genre,' the word 'genre,' the figure, the voice, or the law of genre. ... Thus, as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity.' (Derrida 56)

Leigh Gilmore (1994) studies in detail this postmodern questioning of genres, and its effects on autobiography criticism. She explains that while traditional critics of autobiography "have sought to argue for autobiography's generic coherence and historical continuity," postmodern studies "seek to do without or do away with the definitional heft and limits provided by genre theory" (Gilmore 6). Moving away from a rigid attachment to genres, Gilmore argues, studies about autobiography allow the surfacing of such "oppositions" that traditional genre theory could not deal with. One contradiction that traditional approaches to the genre of autobiography could not "resolve" is that, on the one hand, autobiography is "insufficiently objective" because of the personal involvement of the subject, and on the other hand, it is "insufficiently subjective" because it relies too much on facts of "real" experience. Thus, Gilmore states, "autobiography has fallen outside both fiction and history" (Gilmore 6). While from the point of view of traditional genre theory this may seem an inherent contradiction, I will show that it is exactly this being both "subjective" and "objective" that allows new connections to be made among the autobiographies in my study.

Thus, the unlikely connections I will make among Hungarian Roma and African American autobiographies are made possible by new approaches to autobiography studies. Gilmore emphasizes the contributions of feminist and poststructuralist

approaches, linking them to two important volumes: *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, edited by Estelle C. Jelinek, and *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, edited by James Olney. Jelinek's volume approached autobiographies from a feminist standpoint, while Olney took a poststructuralist theoretical approach. These and other kinds of studies have helped develop new approaches to "autobiography as a self-representational practice that is complexly situated within cultures, and autobiography studies, as an increasingly transdisciplinary critical practice, have incorporated postmodernist techniques and critiques with a variety of results" (Gilmore 3). One such result can be my study, that takes into account both cultural situations and transdisciplinary practices to understand minority life and culture as expressed in these narratives.

Using the work of deconstructionists who opened up the boundaries of these genres, more recent feminist criticism has worked out new ways of looking at genres and their functioning. Caren Kaplan discusses the possibilities opened up for the study of autobiography after poststructuralism: "Adopting Derrida's version of genre production in the service of autobiography criticism poses both limits and possibilities" (Kaplan 119). She introduces the term "out-law genres," that break the most obvious rules of genres, thus enabling "a deconstruction of the 'master' genres, revealing the power dynamics embedded in literary production, distribution, and reception" (Kaplan 119). These out-law genres do not take the place of traditional genres, but rather stay on the limits of genre definitions, for example, by mixing autobiography "as thing itself" and autobiographical criticism. Having autobiography and autobiographical criticism present at the same time in the same text allows a self-consciousness and self-reflection that

makes it possible for individuals to make use even of traditional forms of the genre without being constrained by its boundaries and limitations.

Michael Fischer uses the French term "sondage," meaning soundings, to explain his "techniques of an exploratory dig" in order to "listen to the many kinds of voicing in autobiographical forms that might ... expand the ways genres of autobiography are recognized" (Fischer 79). Here I would like to do a little of this exploratory dig into various named genres, each of which say something about the books in my study. I will do this by looking at some of what Kaplan calls "alternative canons of Western autobiography," that may build upon its conventions but also appropriate its forms to articulate special positions that do not fit into the traditional forms of the genre:

As feminist theories have entered the debates around autobiography, the questions of generic definition and tradition have shifted in order to challenge primarily masculine conventions and canons. Critics have established alternative canons of Western autobiography that include African American slave narratives, diaries, captivity narratives, abolitionist and suffragist personal records, labor activists' accounts, oral histories of immigration and exile, and modernist fiction, among other forms. (Kaplan 115-6)

In these forms of self narratives, Kaplan argues, many of autobiography's conventional aspects, such as the chronological unfolding of one's life, the descriptions of individual development, reflections, and confessions, are "utilized, reworked and even abandoned" (117).

As Kaplan's incorporation of slave narratives in her list makes obvious, these adoptions of autobiography are not limited to the last twenty years, but the ways of looking at them in particular ways have changed recently. The importance of the slave narrative genre in African American literature has been aptly demonstrated, and I will

return to it later. Here, it is important to mention some other alternative genres that help in understanding my position on the autobiographies studied here.

"Resistance literature" is a term used by Barbara Harlow, primarily for prison narratives by women. It is a

writing marked by geopolitical situation. As a global phenomenon, resistance literature is created out of political conflicts between Western imperialism and non-Western indigenous resistance movements. Resistance literature, therefore, breaks many of elite literature's laws: it is comparative but not always linked to a national language; it is overtly political, sometimes anonymous, always pressuring the boundaries of established genres. (Kaplan 120)

While none of the works in my study are about direct political confrontations, an understanding of their special political background is essential. The African American texts were written in the "First World" (before that term was used), but by members of an oppressed class. Both Wright and Hurston were aware of and practiced various forms of resistance to the "Jim Crow laws" of the South in which they lived. Part of my study is to locate these forms of resistance, sometimes "between the lines" of these narratives. Wright's openly political agenda contrasts with Hurston's culture-centered approach, but they both describe modes of resistance in what may seem "established genres" of autobiography. Péliné and Lakatos wrote in what has been called the "Second World," in a closed, Communist society. Without being overly political, part of their resistance is to establish images of a unified "Gypsy nation" in a culture that historically managed to disperse and divide Roma people.

Kaplan also studies the *testimonio*, as a genre that "highlights the possibilities for solidarity and affiliations among critics, interviewers, translators, and the subject who 'speaks'" (Kaplan 122). Further, *testimonio*, according to John Beverley, "is a fundamentally democratic and egalitarian form of narrative in the sense that it implies

that *any* life so narrated can have a kind of representational value" (qtd in Kaplan 123). Calling her life "little" in the title of her autobiography, Péliné suggests that her life is nothing special; yet, her narration of it is still valuable information as an example of a Roma woman's life. Lakatos also generalizes his experiences to all Roma, by suppressing his "Oláh Gypsy" identity, thus suggesting that his life can stand for many Roma lives. Most slave narratives were written to give first-hand witness about what slavery was like; hence, the life of the protagonist was often seen as an example of a "real, typical" slave, notwithstanding the fact that "typical slaves" did not manage to escape. The solidarity and affiliation between the slave narratives' "subjects" and the abolitionists were very important. Building on this tradition, Wright called his book *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, thus generalizing his hero as a Southern boy, not necessarily the genius he actually was. Hurston, while confirming her personal peculiarity, creates an autoethnography out of her autobiography, thus making herself one of the people about whom she writes to members of her university and other interested "critics and interviewers" (she wrote her autobiography upon request from her publisher).

The Bildungsroman is a traditional genre that "has been regarded as the novel of development and social formation of a young man, as in Dickens's *Great Expectation* ... And yet the form of the Bildungsroman has been taken up more recently by women and other disenfranchised persons to consolidate a sense of emerging identity and an increased place in public life" (Smith and Watson 189). John O. Hodges considers Wright's narrative a Bildungsroman: "As the story of a boy's journey from ignorance to experience, *Black Boy* possesses significant features of the classical *Bildungsroman*, a work which recounts a young man's education or character formation" (Hodges 416). In

some ways, all four works in my study can be considered Bildungsromans, and its particular subgenre of the Künstlerroman, the genre that "that deals with the youth and development of an individual who becomes – or is on the threshold of becoming – a painter, musician, or poet" (*Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature*). But they all break the boundaries of this traditional genre by, among others, formal innovations. Wright's unusual narrative strategy is to incorporate poetic insertions into his narrative, thus breaking up both the chronological and thematic flow of his narrative. Hurston's narrative is also unusual, as she begins in the traditional way of narrating her early life, but then she jumps around in picaresque format in the middle section, only to finish her book with a series of essays. In this way, she asserts her freedom from traditional forms of autobiography. Both Lakatos and Péliné write without any divisions in their books. In Lakatos's narrative, this serves to underline the arbitrariness of his memory, emphasized by the title, "Smoky Pictures," which calls attention to subjectivity, discontinuity, and uncertainty. Péliné, in her narrative attempts to imitate orality, thus connecting her to Gypsy traditions of storytelling while being aware of her groundbreaking undertaking in being the first Roma woman in Hungary to write an autobiography.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson discuss trauma narrative as "a mode of writing the unspeakable. ... [S]peaking the unspeakable involves the narrator in a struggle with memory and its belatedness. ... Gilmore stresses in the experience of trauma its self-altering or self-shattering character" (Smith and Watson 206-7). Wright clearly indicates how the trauma of growing up hungry amidst the violence of Southern society has affected his personality. Lakatos comes up with innovative ways of "speaking the unspeakable" by "packaging" the most terrible experiences into a long insertion in the

middle of the book. It is not separated by any formal divisions from the rest of the narratives, thus affirming his own personal involvement, but it is separated in terms of the plot, thus showing his "struggle with memory" and his struggle for wholeness in spite of the "self-shattering" traumas. The women writers do not write directly of traumas; rather, they choose to assert their "racial health" (Hurston) as a demonstration of strength and wholeness in spite of "unspeakable" experiences.

Ramadanovic makes a very interesting generic observation about Wright when he compares "Lacan's understanding of comedy [and] the indestructibility of the comic hero," "Paul de Man's seminal examination of autobiographical writing, *Autobiography as De-facement*" (Ramadanovic 502) and Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. I will discuss his approach later. It is enough here to state that his study is another example of how generic boundaries are opened up by Wright. Timothy Dow Adams also bases his reading of *Black Boy* in what he perceives as generic ambiguities:

Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, published in 1945, has confused readers because of its generic ambiguity. For many readers, the book is particularly honest, sincere, open, convincing, and accurate. But for others, *Black Boy* leaves a feeling of inauthenticity, a sense that the story or its author is not to be trusted. ... Attempting to reconcile these opposing views, I wish to argue that both sides are correct; that the book is an especially truthful account of the black experience in America, even though the protagonist's story often does not ring true. (Adams 76)

### ***The Genre of Autoethnography in Reference to the Four Texts***

While looking at the genres just discussed amply demonstrates that all four works in my study break generic boundaries in order to voice their unique minority experiences, I find the recent generic discourses about autoethnography the most useful terms with which to study ways of expressing complex relationships and initiate dialogues in the

following two distinct areas: within the minority cultures of the subjects and between the majority and the minority cultures.

Carolyn Ellis (2004), in her methodological novel about autoethnography, traces the term's origin and use as she describes in detail a university seminar she held in this area. She defines autoethnography as "writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness" (Ellis 37). David Hayano, writing about "self-ethnographic texts" (qtd in Smith and Watson 186) is usually credited as the originator of the term (Ellis 38), but Ellis mentions that it was used as early as in 1975 by Karl Heider "to refer to the Dani's own account of what people do" (Ellis 38).

Unlike most other critics, Ellis does not perceive autoethnography as particular to minority or disadvantaged people; her emphasis is rather on any research in which the researcher herself becomes part of the object of her study. Her examples include a breast-cancer survivor doing research on breast-cancer survivors. Rather than putting away private experiences and emotions for the sake of objectivity, Ellis states that "[i]n this kind of writing, thus, emotions are not adversary to understanding and objectivity" (Ellis 39). Feelings, Ellis believes, should become a part of scientific research. This approach favors "narrative truth:" "Rather than believing in the presence of an external, unconstructed truth, researchers on this end of the continuum embrace narrative truth, which means that the experiences they depict become believable, lifelike, and possible" (Ellis 45). In her discussion of "narrative truth," Ellis erases the genre divisions between self and scholarship, an approach that, in the words of Irma McClaurin (2001) "implicitly raises questions about the artificial divisions we are trained to make between Self and

scholarship" (McClaurin 69). In this respect, then, autoethnography can be thought of as an "out-law" genre as defined by Kaplan, because it "mix[es] two conventionally 'unmixable' elements" (Kaplan 119), similarly to her example of autobiography as thing itself and autobiographical criticism.

Mary Louise Pratt has defined autoethnography as an instance when "colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways to engage with the colonizer's own terms" (Pratt 7). Pratt's scholarship is also relevant to the study of minority writers who are not literally "colonized" but live on the borderlines of Western cultures. This could be an instance of what Ania Loomba calls "internal colonization," meaning that "'Colonialism' is not just something that happens from outside a country or a people, not just something that operates with the collusion of forces inside, but a version of it can be duplicated from within" (Loomba 16). Hungarian Roma and African American writers live in what Pratt calls "'the contact zone' of cultural encounter" (Pratt, qtd in Smith and Watson 198); thus, studying their works as autoethnographies can help formulate "'how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other' ... and how the identities of dominant and subordinated subjects interlock and interact despite histories of radically uneven relations" (Pratt, qtd in Smith and Watson 198).

Among the four autobiographies in my study, it is Hurston's that has been called and studied as autoethnography, most notably by Françoise Lionnet and Deck. Lionnet sees autoethnography as the "defining of one's subjective ethnicity as mediated through language, history, and ethnographic analysis" (Lionnet). Deck calls autoethnographers "eyewitness" narrators, having a "layering of double consciousness," who present their

cultures in their fullness to the majority reader. Deck studies several American autoethnographies, each of which

demonstrate[s] the same dialogic, polyphonic structure as does Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Cultural explication and personal narrative intertwine in such a way that either discourse may subordinate the other at any given moment in these texts. Furthermore, the traditional historical frame of autobiography is minimized or jettisoned; specific dates of personal events in the authors' lives are hardly mentioned. (Deck 238)

Deck uses the terms "dialogic" and "polyphonic" (without referring at all to Mikhail Bakhtin) primarily because autoethnographies open up dialogues between the minority and majority cultures. The importance of dialogues in autoethnographies has been emphasized by other critics as well. For example, McClaurin writes "that autoethnography functions as a type of cultural mediation and as a repository of cultural memory ... In this respect, autoethnography is dialogical in that it represents the speaker/writer's subjective discourse, but in the language of the colonizer" (McClaurin 67).

Michael A. Chaney (2008) studies the slave narrative of Frederick Douglass in terms of autoethnographical concepts. I find his study useful in formulating my thesis of having dialogues in the two directions mentioned: within the subject's own culture and between the minority and the majority cultures. Chaney studies the white father and black mother of Douglass. The white father, a member of the oppressing majority, violates the bodies of both the mother (through rape) and the son (through violent enslavement). The black mother stands for the subject's own culture, suppressed, hidden, hardly even known. Chaney characterizes Douglass's presentation of the mother as follows:

The presentation of the mother in *Narrative* conforms to Mary Louise Pratt's definition of autoethnography: 'Instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizers' own terms... [which] involves partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idiom of the

conqueror.' Motherless-ness thus becomes a specimen text of the slave's autoethnography, approximating a type familiar to (and perhaps demanded of) the slave narrative. ... The 'self' enunciated here remains shackled to an ethnographic other, an infinite number of muted and otherwise unlettered slaves for whom the narrator must speak. (Chaney 23)

Douglass presents his mother in a contradictory way. On the one hand, he is "motherless," having been separated from his mother at birth, and thus not experiencing deep feelings even at her death. On the other hand, the few lines about the mother let the reader know that she is "blacker than usual," and that she used to steal away at night to spend a few hours with her son. Motherless, Douglass presents himself as one whose cultural belonging has been violently ruptured, not only because of the broken African roots but also because of the suppression of black families and identities in America. Nevertheless, Douglass attempts to describe his cultural belonging in this cultural void, his blackness in an environment where literacy and all cultural expressions are based on white traditions. This "Faustian bargain facing all slave narrators—the unthinkable task of voicing blackness in a culturally white language—is also an underlying tension inherent to the 'partial collaboration' Pratt detects in autoethnography" (Chaney 24). The unusually black mother points to Douglass's strong awareness of his black identity, and the mother's heroic visits to her son point to the strength of his culture. In spite of being separated from her son, the mother exhibits very strong family ties, an aspect which I will show in all four books of my study to represent cultural belonging and being distinct from the individualized mainstream culture.

Douglass's father, whose identity is uncertain other than the fact that he was a white man, is equally important. As one of his arguments against slavery, Douglass plays along with one nineteenth-century idea that justified American slavery by the Biblical

allusion to Noah's cursed son, Ham, said to be the forefather of Africans. Douglass makes use of his own white father to argue that

If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters. (Douglass 50)

Douglass thus exists on the borderline, the "contact zone" of cultures. He literally lays claim to his "whiteness" as well as his blackness. The very act of his writing itself makes him a member of the majority culture, as he makes use of the white American traditions to become one of the abolitionists.

In Douglass, the absence of the mother shows the violent disruption of black families and African culture. The absence of the father represents the unavailability of white culture for the slave, who, after all, is half white. Chaney states the presence of the "the contradiction, the double consciousness endemic to slave narrative and autoethnography" (Chaney 25), suggesting that Douglass managed to use white cultural traditions to relate uniquely black experiences. Because of his oppression and political agenda, he could not indulge in more serious dialogues about these cultures, as the absence of the mother demonstrates and the relative silence on violence shows. In the twentieth-century narratives of my study, this project initiated by Douglass is more fully developed.

## **The Structure of This Dissertation**

### *An Overview of My Main Idea*

The above observations about autoethnography already mention the most important features that make autoethnographic scholarship very useful in understanding

the narratives in my study. The openly avowed emotional involvement, together with the "double consciousness" of the narrator (and thus the erasure of traditional generic limitations), make it possible to create dialogues both within the minority culture and between the minority and majority cultures. The minority culture is not presented as an idealized, unified, or well-delimited entity; rather, the focus is on its own complexity, contradictions, and undefinability. This cultural explication is done in the narrator's own terms (not bound by traditional generic expectations), but is presented in a way that is accessible to readers of both the narrator's own and other cultural groups.

For these reasons, I have chosen two major areas along which to study these four narratives. First, the study of the relationship with the narrator's own family, particularly the mother, sheds light on the complexities of the culture being presented, enabling discussions of oneness and belonging as well as changes over time and painful ruptures. The emotionally charged relationships with the mothers point beyond themselves, serving as examples of interpersonal ties within these minority groups. Moreover, the portrayal of both the closeness of belonging to a family and the distance of having grown out of it point to the special position of these narrators as being both insiders in the culture they describe and outsiders by virtue of education and lifestyle. Second, the study of ways of resistance helps to understand the relationships with the majority cultures, issues concerning what it means to live in the "contact zones" of cultures—places that often involve subtle and open forms of violence. Violence is the most emotional way of encountering the majority culture, creating scenes that make minority experience accessible to readers of all backgrounds. A study of the various ways in which the authors portray resistance to discrimination and violence show the diversities and complexities of

how majority and minority cultures coexist. Both of these are emotionally charged areas, often requiring the double consciousness of "speaking the unspeakable" experiences, as the narrators attempt to reveal the special dynamics of their cultures and present intercultural encounters that are also unique in each case.

### *Dialogues of the Authors with Their Own Cultural Group*

The first major part of my dissertation studies the narrators' struggles with their relationships to their own cultures. In this part, I will make use of the scholarship on autoethnographies, studying the special position of the writers as being both insiders and outsiders to their cultures. As insiders, the narrators describe their ties to their families, particularly to their mothers. These relationships vary from intimacy and closeness (mainly in Péliné and Hurston) through respect and care (mainly in Lakatos) to pain and violence (mainly in Wright). But in all cases, the insider's knowledge and understanding are amply demonstrated and displayed. As outsiders, the narrators have the special vantage point of being educated in the majority culture (though Péliné received little formal education), being distanced in time and experience, and thus understanding their own cultures' values and faults more clearly than their mothers or family members. Whether they describe their families and cultures primarily to members of their own minority group (as do Wright and Hurston) or to members of the majority group (as do Lakatos, Péliné, and Hurston – who seems to address both), they position themselves in all cases as insiders, in the sense possessing both intimate knowledge and emotional involvement, while also being outsiders, in the sense of having the distanced vantage point and the knowledge of the majority culture's values and expressions.

The special emotional ties between mother and child point beyond themselves, to the special relationships between narrator and community in these narratives. In the works under study, the protagonists stand in special relationships to their cultural groups. They are not only the subjects of autobiographical self-narration but also special representatives of the minority groups they come from. Paul John Eakin calls this a "collective identity ... an alternative to the traditionally individualist cast of Western autobiography, a 'synecdochic' model of selfhood" (Eakin 10, discussing Arnold Krupat's essay in the volume). Readers from the majority (or another minority) culture perceive these narratives as "examples" of lives in the particular minority group, while readers from the writer's own culture may read for affirmation or guidance concerning their own experiences in the minority status described. Nevertheless, the very act of writing, of being an intellectual, puts the narrator somewhat outside of his or her cultural group, of which the mother and family seem to be more authentic, insider representatives. This is why the various complex relationships with the mothers as described in these narratives create dialogues between the narrators and their cultures, opening up new ways of looking at these cultures simultaneously from the inside and the outside.

Zora Neale Hurston returned to her own village, Eatonville, after having studied anthropology at university in order to take advantage of her insider's knowledge as she prepared to study black folk life in the South. She writes in *Mules and Men*:

And now, I'm going to tell you why I decided to go to my native village first. I didn't go back there so that the home folks could make admiration over me because I had been up North to college and come back with a diploma and a Chevrolet. I knew they were not going to pay either one of these items too much mind... I hurried back to Eatonville because I knew that the town was full of material and I could get it without hurt, harm, or danger. (Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 3-4)

In her discussion of autoethnographies, Deck emphasizes this inner knowledge of Hurston, based on the special connection between the community and the autoethnographer: "As 'indigenous anthropologists,' Hurston and Jabavu understood the subtleties of their respective black cultures, subtleties of expression that reveal exactly how things stand with the 'inner life' of their communities" (Deck 252). Building on scholarship by Deck, McClaurin emphasizes the mutual nature of this intimate knowledge, the importance of not only understanding her people but also being understood by them:

her work resonates with reflexivity grounded in a social reality of which she is both a product and a producer. ... Hurston seeks out her community not only because it is a significant source of folk data and safe, but because there she cannot pretend to be anything other than what she is—in her hometown, the appellation 'Anthropologist' has no social capital. (McClaurin 67-68)

McClaurin calls this special closeness between Hurston and her village people an "amalgamation of self and community," (McClaurin 67), a relationship that is distinct from the traditional Enlightenment understanding of individualism: "with all due respect to René Descartes ... her work resonates with the belief—THEY ARE BECAUSE I AM/I AM BECAUSE THEY ARE!" (McClaurin 67). I believe that the best way to understand this amalgamation between the subject and her community is to study the relationship with the mother. The mother knows the daughter better than everyone else, and her fidelity and love are steadfast even if she is aware of the daughter's faults and shortcomings. Alice Walker discusses these issues in her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" and her short story, "Everyday Use," both of which I will use to understand the connections among mothers, daughters (and, where applicable, sons), and cultures in the narratives I study. In the case of Hurston, the early death of her mother signals a break with her community, the end of her life in Eatonville. Hurston leaves her

hometown to obtain experience and education, armed with which knowledge she will be able to better study her own culture as an autoethnographer.

Richard Wright's purposes, style, and audience are very different, yet he also considered himself a representative of the suffering and oppression experienced by members of his community. In Wright's case, it is not the cultural oneness, but rather the political awareness of the oppressed that makes Butterfield note a kind of 'amalgamation:' "[t]he self belongs to the people and the people find a voice in the self" (Butterfield 3). The deprivation, pain, and trauma experienced by Wright "taught the young Wright the meaning of racial oppression" (Hakutani 3). Yoshinobu Hakutani calls *Black Boy* a sociological study for these reasons:

Since the narrator is a spokesman for the voiceless black youths of the south he had known, he must be objective and scientific in his observations. Thus *Black Boy*, though not intended as such, is a convincing sociological study. Like sociology, it not only analyzes a social problem but offers a solution. Wright attempts to study the ways in which black life in the South was determined by the environment. (Hakutani 124)

In Wright, the alienation from the mother and the problematic relationship with her shows the alienation from and the problematic relationship with his people and their past. Wright's violently harsh, but later pitied, broken, ill mother is in line with his own attitude to his people, with mixed feelings of anger for their complacency, pity for their sufferings, and love for their own sake.

Similarly to Hurston, Lakatos structures his narrative around distinctions among a home of broken traditions, wanderings in search of meaning, and ambitious efforts towards a formal education. The grandmother's death in the opening passages signals the loss of traditions, the loneliness of his wanderings paves the way for the development of a self-conscious individual, and the experiences at school introduce the majority culture

with its values and brutality. Throughout, the mother appears over and over again, attesting to the ties that continue to bind Lakatos to his people, as well as to the love and understanding they bear towards him. Lakatos remains a part of the family throughout, thus retaining the insider's knowledge, even though his talents and the story of his life make him an educated outsider.

Péliné's "perfect" mother is an embodiment of her celebration of the best in her people. The mother is hard-working, honest, and a representative of family values. Péliné makes her mother almost a protagonist of her narrative, thus putting the values of her culture into the center of her book. Unlike Hurston, who became a trained anthropologist, and unlike Wright and Lakatos, who also received formal higher education, Hilda became acquainted with the majority culture, and thus obtained an outsider's point of view of her own culture, by marrying a Hungarian man. Thus, in her own way, Péliné is also an autoethnographer, describing, among other things, the unusually strong family ties in her culture by simultaneously putting her own emotional involvement with her mother into focus while still exhibiting the distance and viewpoint of the outsider who married "into" the majority culture.

### ***Dialogues of the Authors with the Majority Culture***

The second major part of my dissertation focuses on the voicing of encounters and relationships with the majority culture. As Allen Carey-Webb and Stephen Benz argue in their 1996 volume of essays, *Teaching and Testimony: Rigoberta Menchú and the North American Classroom*, the voicing of these experiences in autoethnographic texts is always contestatory because it involves an appropriation of the majority society's cultural productions to express situations unknown in that culture. As Chaney writes about slave

narratives, they have "the unthinkable task of voicing blackness in a culturally white language" (Chaney 24). In Ruth E. Trotter White's formulation, autoethnography is "righting the ways in which a culture can be misrepresented" (White 65). Moreover, there are instances in which cultures have not just been misrepresented, but not represented at all. Eakin mentions the American Indians:

Arnold Krupat brings home the stark reality of the power of the literate class over the life of texts. There *were* no Native American autobiographies until the 1930s for the breathtakingly simple reason that the Indian was not recognized as a person with a *culture* in the received white construction of that term. Perceived by the whites as 'wholly other' ... the Indian ... possessed 'nothing worthy of textualization.' (Eakin 5)

This formulation describes the situation of the narratives of Gypsies, who not only had to correct misrepresentations and misunderstandings, but also wrote in the void of not even having been noticed as a culture "worthy of textualization." As Dupcsik observes, "The general attitude in Hungary towards 'the Gypsy question,' and towards Gypsies in general can be best characterized as indifference and unconcern"<sup>21</sup> (Dupcsik 94). Thus, in writing their autobiographies, both Lakatos and Péliné had to come up with novel and innovative ways to speak about a culture that had not been represented earlier, and to present it in ways available and interesting for a majority readership, yet containing their own culture's uniqueness.

It is important to point out that the African American and the Hungarian Roma minority groups, with all their differences, both occupy a similar position of living on the borderlines of their societies. Both Lakatos and Péliné wrote in the context of living in the "Second World," in a Communist dictatorship, thus not being parts of the Western European and American intellectual discourse of their time. Nevertheless, they had

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<sup>21</sup> "A 'cigánykérdéssel', s egyáltalán a cigánysággal kapcsolatban a magyarországi közgondolkodót a két világháború közötti korszakban elsősorban a közöny, az érdektelenség jellemezte" (Dupcsik 94).

access to the traditional Hungarian and Western literary canons and their conceptions of prose narrative and autobiography were influenced by these. The African American texts were written in what would be called the "First World;" their literary influences were also primarily the traditional Western canon, with of course, the special heritage of slave narratives and other African American literary productions. The important point to note is that both groups lived on the margins of their societies, close enough for actual physical contact with the majority culture and its heritage, but very far from them in concrete experiences and cultural background. Hence, theoretical formulations concerning "Western canons" can be used to further understand these books, but the attention to differences and details must be great. Similarly, neocolonial or Third-World studies can provide useful insights into understanding these narratives, but it must be kept in mind that these writers are neither neocolonial nor Third-World. In a sense, the situation of these writers is comparable to the present-day globalized world, where the visibility of the other's existence is greater than previously, but is certainly not accompanied by understanding or equality. This is why Kaplan's statement about resistance literature can be used here: "[w]e can locate most resistance literature and out-law genres on the borders between colonial and neocolonial systems, where subjectivity, cultural power, and survival are played out in the modern era" (Kaplan 133).

Living on the borderline, at the clash of cultures, can never be a peaceful affair. The pain and deprivation Richard Wright must have felt when he had no access to the library, the confusion of Zora Neale Hurston as she was failing in her initial communications with members of her village after getting back from college, the humiliating experience of Menyhért Lakatos in being the only Gypsy boy at school, and

the desperation of Hilda Péliné for not being able to attend the Dance School of the Hungarian State Opera House are all "interior" cultural experiences, shocks, of minority status that the majority reader may or may not understand. Experiences of real, physical violence are more palpable and more readily available. Thus, while violence is the real and palpable way in which the majority cultures dealt with these minority groups, its descriptions also demonstrate a state of being ground between two cultures, the pain of experiencing a spasm between possibilities and realities. Experiences of violence involve just as intense emotional involvements as the relationships with the mothers, but violence always arises out of a contact with the other culture (even when it is within the culture, it can still be traced to outside violence, as trauma narratives tell us). Thus, a study of the presence of violence in these books can be a study of how these autoethnographic texts engage the majority culture in a dialogue about the emotional depths to which the minority narrator has experienced the pains of those encounters. This is why the second part of my dissertation begins with a discussion of the various ways in which violence is present in the four narratives and continues with a study of other experiences of repression and possible ways of resistance.

While Zora Neale Hurston emphasizes the relative isolation of her childhood hometown, Eatonville, Deck notes her "intimate knowledge of the white capacity for human feelings towards blacks" (Deck 241). By the time of writing her autobiography, Hurston had had enough experience of white culture to see the image of herself and her culture as it contrasted to the majority culture's. Many have criticized Hurston for living up to white stereotypes rather than openly confronting them. In my opinion, rather than openly confronting stereotypes, she chose to instill the values of her culture into her

readers. She does to her own self and her own culture what she does to conventional autobiography: she makes use of mainstream expectations only to expose the differences by unexpected situations and turns of events. As Deck states, "Hurston does attempt to adhere to the conventional innocence-to-experience plot of autobiography, even though she demonstrates an aversion of specific dates and rigorously avoids mentioning many intimate details in her life" (Deck 242).

In the process of her innocence-to-experience development, the young Zora literally fights to develop her personality, so that later she is able to describe violence and the threat of violence in ways that reflect her own special attitude towards race relations. She writes about violence and resistance to oppression very succinctly, but a careful reading reveals many instances of problematic encounters with the majority culture. Toni Morrison, whose work has been greatly influenced by Hurston, is useful in understanding Hurston's own use of violence and resistance. In "The Site of Memory," Morrison locates her literary predecessors in slave narratives, but explains how her own presentation of the body, violence, and emotions in her novels are different from slave narratives. Slave narratives often remained silent about emotions and interior lives in order to evoke the white reader's "nobility of heart and his high-mindedness" (Morrison 68). In this way, Morrison also suggests that authors of slave narratives used the language of the oppressor, satisfying his personality and expectations, in order to narrate experiences alien to him. Rather than expounding on graphic details of pain, torture, and inner sufferings, they often "drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate" (Morrison 68), letting the reader's emotions work on their own. Morrison states,

But most importantly—at least for me—there was no mention of their interior life. For me—a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more

than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman—the exercise is very different. My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate.' (Morrison 70).

That is to say, Toni Morrison sees her art as a way of openly talking about African Americans' interior lives, the ways in which they experienced physical and emotional atrocities. Emphasis on the body, even as it experiences violence, constitutes a new and readily accessible way to relate the interior lives of those subjected to discrimination.

Western thinking has privileged the mind over the body since Descartes, making it logical for writers of slave narratives to appeal to the mind. But, using the example of Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Christopher Stuart and Stephanie Todd (2009) argue that presentations of the body, "black corporeality" are of increased importance in recent minority writings. Most minority groups have traditionally been identified with their bodies. Thus,

it is not surprising that those most responsible for restoring the body to visibility in autobiography and autobiography studies are those—women, people of color, the disfigured and the disabled—who historically have been identified with their bodies and who were thus relegated to silence and invisibility in the context of a paradigm that privileged the disembodied mind. (Stuart and Todd 9)

In this way, the dialogue between minority autobiographers and their readers has shifted from appeals to the mind towards more open presentations of the stark realities experienced by the body. Hurston's openness about her personal desires and bodily experiences can be understood in light of these discussions. Moreover, this openness lends Hurston a sense of honesty, giving special strength to her few but pointed comments on race relations and ways of resistance.

Richard Wright's story of having to steal into the library with a borrowed card to read Mencken and other thinkers demonstrates his access to and thorough understanding of a culture Southern society tried to deny him. *Black Boy* is much more saturated with

violence than Hurston's narrative, and Wright's experiences are very different in this respect. In his narrative, contact with the majority society is persistently violent, affecting all aspects of inter-racial encounters. Intra-racial violence, in turn, signals the traumatic experience of the breakdown of African American culture, traditions, and families. Hence, Wright's approaches to resistance are also necessarily different from Hurston's. In fact, he distinguishes himself from his family and friends by emphasizing the intensity with which he which he experienced racial issues. Turning to Communism as an ideology and Communists as a group to belong to, Wright chose the language and attitude of an ideology that openly challenged the very foundations of American culture and democracy. This shows that Wright did not believe that American society was capable of ever incorporating him or black people within its system. The traumatic experiences of violence amply demonstrate why Wright perceived racial encounters as hopeless, as well as the total breakdown of his people's culture, as they escaped into the fanaticism of an extremist church. It is by keeping in mind the depths of these traumatic experiences that we can understand Wright's own approach to resistance and racial justice. These are the "predicaments" that Ramadanovic claims Wright had the "readiness to learn" from "in order to benefit from" (Ramadanovic 511). And this is the background against which June Jordan's above-quoted sentence claims Wright asserted "our need for an alternative, benign environment" (qtd in Brantley 218).

Lakatos was also an educated person, within the context of the Hungarian Communist regime. Thus, his book conforms to political expectations, but manages to describe images of Gypsy life that could not be touched by the dictatorship. In a way somewhat similar to Wright, Lakatos presents extreme cases of violence both within the

Gypsy community and in encounters with the majority society. In this way, he also emphasizes the breakdown of Romani culture and communities, the seemingly impossible task of redeeming any cultural treasures of the past in the face of the violent and humiliating present. Nevertheless, Lakatos does attempt to affirm the value of Gypsy traditions, but presents it to the majority society through the authority of his educated self. Unlike Hurston, who involves her self and her writing in the folk culture she presents and creates, Lakatos describes some bits and pieces of Gypsy traditions, some of which are worth remembering, and others that should be abandoned. His resistance to oppression is partly based on his ability to be conversant and act in both cultures.

Although her city background in a largely multi-ethnic environment differs greatly from Hurston's all-black hometown, Péliné's attitude towards portraying intercultural encounters is similar to Hurston's in many ways. Like Hurston, Péliné constructs a culture, a positive celebration of folk traditions that does not stand in opposition to the majority culture but is rather meant to enrich it in spite of the admitted cultural gaps. Unlike the male-signed narratives, in which violence is primarily destructive and resistance futile, the female-signed narratives make use of violent scenes to affirm their inner lives and resist racial stereotypes so as to construct cultural values and traditions. Péliné's book does not center on violence, but there are scenes of both inter-racial and intra-racial violence, and both types show Hilda's deep emotional reactions, and through these, her interior life in painful social situations. As the only one of the four writers who did not receive formal education, she nevertheless exhibits a subtle understanding of majority culture, and describes the clever tricks she played to

confidently resist racism, while at the same time ending up being the connection between the races.

### *Conclusion*

My comparative study of Wright, Hurston, Lakatos, and Péliné will focus on how these autobiographers engage in dialogues with their own cultures and with the majority cultures. But as a four-way comparison, my study will also create dialogues among the four authors, using the existing scholarship and the new insights I have come to on each to better understand the others through carefully noted similarities and differences. Issues of poverty, hunger, violence, homelessness, struggle for education, search for traditions, and redefining family relationships are all bases for comparisons and contrasts. Though the autobiographical narratives of my study span cultures, races, continents, and political situations, the dialogues I create among them about these issues will hopefully open up new ways to appreciate both the little known Hungarian Roma literature and the better researched African American autobiographies.

## **Part I. Dialogues of the Authors with Their Own Cultural Group**

### ***Introduction***

#### **The Insider/Outsider Positions of the Artists in Autoethnographies**

In Part I of my dissertation, I will study the unique positions of Hurston, Wright, Lakatos, and Péliné, as they engage in the autoethnographic project of describing their own cultures and communities in clear and coherent ways, but without denying their personal involvement and emotional stake. While their purposes, attitudes, styles, and values are obviously very different, I would like to argue that both Hurston and Wright share the difficult and contradictory position of writing about their own lives with the emotional involvement and detailed knowledge of an insider, while also maintaining an outsider's distance from their backgrounds for purposes of – in Hurston's case – an ethnographic objectivity and – in Wright's case – a critical assessment of a rejected way of life. Similarly, Lakatos and Péliné share the double task of narrating their personal developments while at the same time carefully portraying their Roma backgrounds to the readers.

Critics have noted this contradictory aspect of both Hurston's and Wright's narratives, going beyond what Smith and Watson describe as the "complexities of autobiographical subjectivity and its performative nature" (Smith and Watson 48). Deck, for example, uses the notion of "visiting daughters" to emphasize Hurston's "ethnographic awareness" in addition to her "layering of the autobiographical double consciousness

(myself in the past compared to myself at the present)" (Deck 246). Along the same lines, Lynn Domina goes so far as to call autoethnography an "oxymoronic term:"

Because of the tendency of ethnography to exoticize its object of study, an ethnographer practicing autobiography would be forced to negotiate between a disciplinary practice which can sometimes seem to construct characters as odd or quaint and a simultaneous desire to represent herself realistically rather than romantically; in this sense, autoethnography could be argued to be an oxymoronic term. (Domina 198)

This oxymoronic contradiction between representing their selves realistically or romantically was also noted by Leif Sorensen, arguing that Hurston, in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, attempts "to produce a narrative discourse that has access to this private realm but does not transgress the codes of ethnographic authenticity" (Sorensen 19).

Wright, Hurston, Lakatos, and Péliné are compared here not because of their similar attitudes to their cultures, but rather because of their similarly complex positions of representing both their communities and their lives. Hurston's ethnographic descriptions of her hometown, Eatonville, are mixed with her autobiographical presentations of her life in the larger South. Similarly, Péliné celebrates a particular instance of Hungarian Roma culture: the life of a Gypsy musician family living in the capital city. At the same time, she presents the emotional vicissitudes of her own life, including family relationships, artistic desires, racial incidents, and love of a gadjo man. Jane Davis, studying Wright's "ethnographic impulse," argues that "research shows that black writers have acted as ethnographers of sorts" (3). This is not a presentation or a celebration of a culture, but rather, in Mary Mahony's formulation, a description of "the difficulty of becoming a responsible and articulate black man in an oppressive and racist culture that has organized its social, political, and educational structure to prevent that

from happening" (Mahony 1). Mahony stresses the distinction of this theme concerning racist culture from Wright's goal of depicting "the development of his literary and artistic skills, tracing their emergence from a set of fragile roots to the eventual fruition" (Mahony 1). In other words, the "hostility toward blacks that many readers notice in Wright's works" (Davis 10) does not contradict the statement that there is an ethnographic aspect of *Black Boy*, even though it is not a celebration or a creation of culture, but a cry against not only a racist white society but also the inadequate and mistaken black responses to it. Looking at his own culture, Lakatos sees a contrast between old Roma traditions and the carelessness among many of his contemporaries. It is against this background that he describes his own long and emotional path towards education, recognition, and self-respect.

I will study these special positions in two chapters. In Chapter 1, I will study the special roles of the mothers. In Hurston and Péliné, the mothers stand for the past and cultural traditions that are studied, appreciated, presented, and built upon by the daughters. In Wright's case there is virtually no traditional culture to celebrate, while in Lakatos's case the positive cultural traditions are not primarily centered around the figure of the mother. In their cases, the mothers' roles are mainly important in promoting the formal education of their sons, which in turn enabled their becoming the professional writers they became. But in all four narratives, the mothers are not portrayed only for the direct and self-conscious influences they had on their children. The narrators also present their often equivocal relationships with their mothers in order to point out their special and frequently contradictory relationships to their cultures and backgrounds. Studying the relationships with the mother figures is a useful way to understand the special positions

of the narrators as both insiders and outsiders to the cultures they describe. Chapter 2 will concentrate on the narrators' relationships to their homes and homeplaces. Through a careful study of the unusual narrative structures in all four books, I will show the various artistic techniques employed to present homes marred by the pains of minority lives while still bearing the emotional attachments of the children growing up in them. As the subject positions of the narrators shift in their narratives, they call attention to multiple possible ways of looking at their cultures, thus precluding the root of all stereotypes: a unitary interpretation of people, cultures, or life situations.

As an introduction to both of these chapters, I will carefully review some of Alice Walker's ideas and some scholarly responses to these. Walker's writings about female African American heritage and art are clearly relevant for Hurston and Péliné. Her ideas – expanded upon by other scholars – on the educated artist's relationship to the home can help in better understanding the special positions of all four writers, particularly as they are expressed in unusual narrative strategies. I will also present a brief study of the narratives' belonging to the genre of *kunstlerroman*, in order to call attention to the writers' self-conscious presentations of themselves as developing artists, having perspectives and goals that differ from both ethnographic descriptions and traditional life-stories. In the case of all four books, the narrator is set apart from the culture being described by virtue of education and/or social position, but still retains the position of a thorough insider to the culture being described.

## **Understanding Mothers, Homes, Art, and Education with the Help of Alice Walker**

Alice Walker has written extensively about the special positions of African American women artists, especially as they are influenced by the cultural heritage of their mothers. Walker did not simply "discover" Zora Neale Hurston's literature, legacy, and grave, but also erected memorials for her: a headstone on her grave and writings about literary ancestry. Hence, Walker's writings are useful for a further understanding of Hurston's legacy and relationship to her culture. Péliné's portrayal of her mother is similar to Hurston's in the positive celebration of traditions and becoming a role-model for the creativity of her daughter. But Alice Walker also writes about the differences and the ensuing difficulties between the traditional art represented by the mother and the professional, written forms of art practiced by the daughters. One is not better than the other, but the differences must be understood if one is to appreciate the cultural heritage of the mothers as represented by the daughters. Wright and Lakatos portray their mothers in different ways; nevertheless, certain observations by Walker and the critical literature on her work can help in understanding Wright's and Lakatos's positions as they also grapple with their cultural backgrounds after having become celebrated professional writers.

There are two things I would like to emphasize with my overview of Walker's essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," short story, "Everyday Use," and poem, "Women": first, the mother's special role in the development of the artist (the theme of chapter 1) and, second, the precarious position of the professional artist reporting on his or her childhood background (the theme of chapter 2). So first, a careful reading of

Walker's writings reveals a twofold role attributed to the mothers in paving the way of artistic development for the daughters. On the one hand, Walker describes how the cultural heritage and strength represented by the often uneducated African American women was the background out of which her and other African American daughters' art arose. On the other hand, she also writes about the direct material and emotional support the mothers gave to further the developments of the daughters into professional artists through education. Walker distinguishes between the art of the mothers and the art of the daughters. The mothers' art was part of their everyday lives, it comprised folk customs and traditions that enriched their otherwise extremely difficult and harsh lives. Based on these traditions, the daughters, having easier lives and access to education, could develop their own particular forms of art, an art in written form that builds heavily on the mothers' heritage but was developed for larger audiences. The second point I would like to emphasize is primarily based on Sam Whitsitt's study of Walker's story "Everyday Use." He studies the contradictions of the professional artist just described: the pain involved in being both a cultural insider and outsider, as represented by the daughter, Dee, in the short story. These ideas will help me formulate the situation of all four writers, all having to face the difficulties of being educated professionals while at the same time reporting on their emotionally charged communities and homes of their childhood. Referring to studies of the unusual narrative technique of "Everyday Use," I will study the "framing" techniques found in the narratives. These techniques are used by all four authors to simultaneously exhibit both a professional attitude in describing unique minority life-situations and a personal reportage of often painful memories and intimate relationships.

In her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" Walker "first articulates the metaphor of quilting to represent the creative legacy that African Americans have inherited from their maternal ancestors" (Whitsitt 443). The quilt became symbolic because it is at once a useful object and a piece of art. And it is exactly this double role of quilts that the short story "Everyday Use" turns upon. One daughter, Dee, who has left home and gotten an education, wants to take the quilts and exhibit them in her room as artistic decorations. The other daughter, Maggie, would put them to "everyday use," thus probably wearing them out, but it is not a problem, as she "knows how to quilt." Nancy Tuten summarizes the general commentaries on the short story, as they "typically center on Mama's awakening to one daughter's [Dee's] superficiality and to the other's [Maggie's] deep-seated understanding of heritage" (Tuten 125). It is important that the quilt is an artistic legacy not only because it was handmade by the grandmother but also because it literally was woven out of family memorabilia:

They had been pieced by Grandma Dee and then Big Dee and me had hung them on the quilt frames on the front porch and quilted them. One was in the Lone Star pattern. The other was Walk Around the Mountain. In both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jattell's Paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece, about the size of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Grandpa Ezra's uniform that he wore in the Civil War. (Walker, "Everyday Use" 1227)

Thus, the quilts condense in themselves issues of national history, family traditions, economic realities, and the mother's and grandmother's artistic legacies. They are artifacts whereby the artists make artistic statements without recourse to any unusual material or creating superfluous objects. In other words, the artistic expression is made within the space of everyday, ordinary life. The special message of the artists is produced by skillfully turning the everyday necessities into an artistic production.

In that sense, the quilts are similar to the flowers around Alice Walker's mother's house: "my mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in" (Walker, *In Search of* 241). On the one hand, there is an ironic distance between the "shabby house" and the beautiful flowers chosen to adorn it, and on the other hand, this contradiction does not deny the dire conditions in which they lived. Mrs. Walker's flowers put an atmosphere of cheer against poverty of the family: "Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms--sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena . . . and on and on" (Walker, *In Search of* 241). These flowers both accentuate the economic constraints of the Walker family and emphasize the possibilities of Mrs. Walker's talents. In a sense, the flowers are made of the same substance as the house. The Walkers are working people who make a meager living by cultivating the *land*. And it is significant here that the nature of the work she does during the day to earn her bread is the same as the nature of the work Mrs. Walker does to adorn her house: "Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid out new beds. When she returned from the fields she might divide clumps of bulbs, dig a cold pit, uproot and replant roses, or prune branches from her taller bushes or trees--until night came and it was too dark to see" (Walker, *In Search of* 241). Working in her garden becomes almost an extension of the day of working in the fields: her decorating art is not contradictory and opposite to the work which she performs daily to maintain the family's existence in the "shabby house."

We could say that this is art without a space of its own. Alice Walker talks about Virginia Woolf's statement that a woman needs a room of her own to write fiction. But

Mrs. Walker, the quilt-making woman, and the poet Phillis Wheatley did not have rooms of their own. Phillis Wheatley did not even own herself. They are similar to the multitudes of black artistic women, who during Reconstruction, "wandered or sat about the countryside crooning lullabies to ghosts, and drawing the mother of Christ in charcoal on courthouse walls" (Walker, *In Search of* 232). These women did the only thing they could do: they expressed their artistic abilities without a space or material of their own.

While Alice Walker was greatly inspired by her mother, it would be a great mistake to conflate her own art with that of the mother. Mary Helen Washington states that "Walker is most closely aligned in the story ['Everyday Use'] with the 'bad daughter,' Dee... the one who goes out in the world and returns with African clothes and an African name. Like Dee, Walker leaves the community, appropriating the oral tradition in order to turn it into a written artefact" (Washington 102). Alice Walker's inclusion of the poem "Women" at the end of "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" shows that she did not consider herself doing what her mother did; rather, she considered her mother's heritage and help a background that helped define her own professional art that she practiced in her accomplished positions. It is worthwhile to quote the poem in full in order to point out the kinds of influence she attributes to her mother. The strength of the mothers in the poem points to folk traditions and perseverance in the face of extremely difficult material and social conditions. It is the celebrated strength of African American women that made it possible for them not only to survive but also to hand down inspirations of beauty and art. However, the poem is very clear in pointing out that daughters like Alice Walker received not only inspiration but also actual help from their mothers. The women "starched white shirts," and thus created a place for the daughters in the "white collar"

world of education and professional artistic life, centered around "books / Desks / A place for us." This place, into which "mama's generation" helped the daughters to get, was itself alien to the mothers themselves, as they did not know "a page / Of it / Themselves." While the artistic heritage of creativity and preserving family objects is directly emphasized in Hurston's and Péliné's narratives only, this active material and emotional support given by the mothers to help their children "rise out" of their dire childhood conditions is presented to some extent in all four narratives of my study.

"Women" by Alice Walker

They were women then  
 My mama's generation  
 Husky of voice- Stout of  
 Step  
 With fists as well as  
 Hands  
 How they battered down  
 Doors  
 And ironed  
 Starched white  
 Shirts  
 How they led  
 Armies  
 Head dragged Generals  
 Across mined  
 Fields  
 Booby-trapped  
 Ditches  
 To discover books  
 Desks  
 A place for us  
 How they knew what we  
 Must know  
 Without knowing a page  
 Of it  
 Themselves.  
 (Walker, *In Search of* 243)

Thus, while the art of the children was inspired and helped by the mothers, the children's lives as artists were very different from those of the mothers. "Everyday Use" also reveals much about the conflict between the mother and daughter that arises out of this different position—that is, the difficulties of the daughters' belonging to both worlds at the same time. These difficulties are presented by Walker through the person of the returning daughter, Dee. But they are also present in the four narratives of my study, that, I will show, employ framing strategies similar to "Everyday Use" to portray both the emotional involvement of belonging to a culture and the distance of the professional artist reporting on that culture from the vantage point of education and experience. In this way, these narrative strategies also allow multiple views of the cultures to be presented.

Alice Walker emphasizes that Martin Luther King's speech during the "greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation" (Walker, *In Search of* 102) encouraged the participants to "go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back . . . to Georgia . . . knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. . . . This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with" (Walker, *In Search of* 104). According to Walker, "it is impossible to regret hearing that speech because no black person I knew had ever encouraged anybody to 'go back to Mississippi. . . .,' and I knew if this challenge was taken up by the millions of blacks who normally left the South for better fortunes in the North, a change couldn't help but come. . . . We would proceed with the revolution from our homes" (Walker, *In Search of* 161). Yet, the return of Dee to her hometown in "Everyday Use" is marked by contradiction and pain. It is worthwhile, therefore, to look at this return in some detail and use this understanding to study the relationships to one's own background in the narratives of my study.

Dee left her poor Southern home years earlier in disdain, "to try to make something of" (Walker, "Everyday Use" 1228) herself. She had hated her degrading and poor background, and Mama used to think she was happy when their first house burned down: "[s]he had hated the house that much" (Walker, "Everyday Use" 1224). Upon her return in the story, she is dressed in the fashionable ways of the story's present, and observes the house, the artifacts, and the people in it with the eyes of a curious ethnographer. She wants the quilts and some other old objects to take away and "think of something artistic to do" (Walker, "Everyday Use" 1226) with them. Mama, who at the beginning of the story expresses some admiration for her successful daughter, "reaches a watershed" (Tuten 128) when Dee announces that she has changed her name to the African-sounding "Wangero." Tuten points out that at this point, Mama's narrative voice abruptly shifts from the present to the past tense, thus distancing the narrator from the events, "giving her more control" (Tuten 128) and understanding of Maggie's homespun values.

But Whitsitt takes Tuten's assertion that "Mama's new appreciation of Maggie is significant because it represents the establishment of a sisterhood between mother and daughter" (Tuten 126), and studies how Dee is not necessarily excluded from that sisterhood. In fact, he notices a similarity between Dee and the mother. As Mama's narrative shifts to the past, Whitsitt argues, she does something similar to her daughter, Dee. She distances herself from the story, the events, thus being able to see her daughters more objectively and with less emotional involvement.

The shift to the past tense, however, shifts this non-story into a story, into something moving toward art and representation ... At this moment, in the space marked by the shift to the past tense, a spatio-temporal dimension opens up which makes possible reflection, knowledge, representation, epiphany, manipulation,

and power. And it is in such a space that we can begin to see how Mama, Dee, and Walker are linked. (Whitsitt 453)

While Maggie, who "knows how to quilt" is the "authentic" (Whitsitt 449) representative of folk art in the making, Dee distances herself from the home enough to be able to have an "outsider's" perspective on what is valuable while retaining the "insider's" knowledge of what to look for.

This position of Dee and her relationship with her Mama is very significant in understanding the positions of Zora, Richard, Hilda, and Boncza, as they narrate their life stories. Just like Mama and Dee, they "frame" their worlds into a "whole from which [they] exclude [themselves]" (Whitsitt 452). They all give artistic representation of a past which includes only their earlier selves. Yet, the "authenticity" of their voices is guaranteed, like Dee's voice: "While the name 'Dee! Wangero', most obviously indicates what appears to be an opposition, with 'Wangero' insisting that 'Dee' no longer exists, we see that both are 'present,' and traced each by the other" (Whitsitt 452). The spatio-temporal distance guarantees a certain amount of "objectivity," while the closeness guarantees "authenticity."

But Whitsitt does not fail to notice that this distance and closeness involves great emotional involvement. He cites the mother's "increasing emotional distance from Dee" (Whitsitt 452) in order to see her for what she really is, and goes on to say:

[W]e can consider more acutely what is at stake in Dee's emotions, since she feels a need to frame the 'story' from the outset. It would seem that Dee's emotions are indeed much more precarious than are those of Mama, who, beginning without a frame, as it were, risks from the outset. A significant difference between Mama and Dee is that Mama has this capacity to risk. (Whitsitt 452)

And it is precisely the precarious emotions of Dee and Mama that create a "sisterhood" between the two of them as well, showing that both are involved in the events to such an

extent that they need to frame their experiences in order to present them. Hence, it is the need for the frame, the sign of distance, that becomes a sign of closeness itself. Dee's hidden emotions indicate her personal involvement.

In my study of homes, I will pay attention to various unusual narrative strategies in all four books, ways of "framing" experiences and thus expressing both personal involvement and distance. In the narratives of Hurston, Wright, Péliné, and Lakatos, there are several different instances of such frames, and these shifting narrative positions enable the writers to express various views and interpretations of their backgrounds. In this way, all four narratives avoid a simplified or unitary representation of minority life or culture. While allowing for the subjectivity of various emotionally charged experiences, the books, in their own unique ways, also offer possibilities to view the cultures and minority lives from several viewpoints.

### **The Authors' Presentations of Their Artistic Developments**

In order to understand the special positions of the artists as just described, it is important to show that the writers of all four narratives self-consciously described their lives with special emphasis on their artistic developments. In various ways, all four autobiographies deal with the development of the characters' selves, maturing from childhood into adulthood with the particular twist of a minority person developing into an artist who will come to represent for many the culture of his or her ethnic group. Thus, among the possible generic categories that could be applied to my chosen texts, I emphasize the usefulness of the Bildungsroman, with its subgenre, the Künstlerroman, the genre that deals with the development of the personality of the artist. In the case of

these minority autobiographies, all four developing artists viewed their lives as not simply their individual stories but also stories of their minority groups, about which their readers – be they from the majority culture or from their own minority group – would form their particular opinions based on the life writings presented. Hence, the stories of their artistic developments must be also studied as autoethnographies. A formulation of this particular blend of the *kunstlerroman* and autoethnography will lead me to study in detail the unique position of each author as being both an insider and an outsider to the culture being described. Though their attitudes to the minority cultures described vary greatly, the special position of the mother and the family in each narrative amounts to a unique and telling dialogue about minority life with its values, predicaments, and contradictions.

One way or another, all four authors describe how the religions of their parents are turned into or replaced by their own artistic creativities, in ways similar to Stephen Dedalus's journey from a religious to an artistic vocation in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. This comparison has been made by John O. Hodges and Tamara Denissova—for example, between Wright and Joyce. Hodges emphasizes *Black Boy's* generic belonging to the *bildungsroman*, but adds that Richard's development is in pursuit of a literary career:

As the story of a boy's journey from ignorance to experience, *Black Boy* possesses significant features of the classical *Bildungsroman*, a work which recounts a young man's education or character formation. ... And *Black Boy* is the story of a boy whose selfhood must be forged in the crucible of a hostile society which is determined to suppress any positive assertion of personhood. Since Richard is interested in pursuing a literary career, the restrictions which his society places upon him become all the more serious. *Black Boy*, then, like other exemplary works in the genre (such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Keller's *Grüne Heinrich*, and Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*), depicts the arduous pilgrimage of the embattled artist in a restrictive environment. (Hodges 418)

Denissova quotes a passage from near the end of *Black Boy*, "I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words that gnaw in us all to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human" (365), and explains that "This high-flown note (reminiscent of Stephen Dedalus's passionate credo at the climax of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) crowns the story of the writer's formative process in which his social self becomes one that is translated by a creative individuality in the course of his self-identification" (Denissova 248).

A particularly important step in Richard's artistic development is the time when he realizes the impossibility of keeping his promise to pray. In the following passage, he turns to writing verses and Indian stories instead. In the following passage, Wright finds religion dissatisfying and "stumbles upon" writing instead, that gives him hitherto unknown excitement:

My attempts at praying became a nuisance, spoiling my days; and I regretted the promise I had given to Granny. But I stumbled on a way to pass the time in my room, a way that made the hours fly with the speed of the wind. I took the Bible, pencil, paper, and a rhyming dictionary and tried to write verses for hymns. I justified this by telling myself that, if I wrote a really good hymn, Granny might forgive me. But I failed even in that; the Holy Ghost was simply nowhere near me. ...

One day while killing my hour of prayer, I remembered a series of volumes of Indian history I had read the year before. Yes, I knew what I would do; I would write a story about the Indians ...

I was excited ... My environment contained nothing more alien than writing or the desire to express one's self in writing" (120-121).

Wright states his honest desire to pray at this point in his life, in an attempt to improve his relationship with his Granny and to please his mother. He suggests that the nuisance his attempts became was not his personal choice of rebellion or self-assertion; it rather seems to have pervaded his days almost in spite of himself. In a similar way, his attempts

at writing hymns and, later, his first story, came to him as spontaneously as the Holy Ghost was supposed to but did not. It is suggested, therefore, that his artistic endeavor was a call that went beyond being a simple human choice of one activity over another. Moreover, this artistic awakening, as the passage reveals, defined his special relationship with his family and peers. Richard's attempts at prayer stem from an unusual desire in him to appease his otherwise criticized and hated grandmother for having made her "ridiculous before the members of her church" (139). Richard had told her "if I ever saw an angel like Jacob did, then'd believe" (117), which the grandmother overheard to have meant that he has seen an angel. This misunderstanding created quite a havoc at church, causing "the greatest shame and humiliation of her entire religious life" (116). The unusual conciliatory tone of the praying passage in *Black Boy* is emphasized by Quiana J. Whitted's observation that "the same scene in 'Memories of My Grandmother' [Wright's later piece on his grandmother] does not emphasize the youth's blunder as much as it underscores a willful irrationality on the part of the grandparent" (Whitted 21). It seems, therefore, that in *Black Boy* Wright chose to describe this scene by concentrating on Richard's blunder and failure, taking an authorial position of pity mixed with reconciliatory desires towards his grandmother and her religion. Thus, the important passage of religion turning into artistic creation arises out of an unusual closeness with his family. Out of his honest attempt to be more of an insider in the church (by trying to pray), his artistic endeavor arises, distancing him from the family, becoming an alien to his environment. This important moment in the artistic development of Richard in *Black Boy* thus establishes his authorial position as both an *insider* and an *outsider* to his family

and environment. It is this double position that enables his writing to be considered as having autoethnographic elements, which I will detail in the next two chapters.

In a somewhat similar passage, Hurston also turns her religious experience into artistic experience, establishing her own distance from her parents and embellishing her with a yearning for something more:

[My mother] gave me a licking one afternoon for repeating something I had overheard a neighbor telling her. She locked me in her room after the whipping, and the Bible was the only thing in there for me to read ... In searching for more Davids, I came upon Leviticus. There were exciting things in there to a child eager to know the facts of life ... In that way I found out a number of things the old folks would not have told me. Not knowing what we were actually reading, we got a lot of praise from our elders for our devotion to the Bible. ...

In a way this early reading gave me great anguish through all my childhood and adolescence. My soul was with the gods and my body in the village. People just would not act like gods. Stew beef, fried fat-back and morning grits were no ambrosia from Valhalla. Raking back yards and carrying out chamber pots, were not the tasks of Hercules. I wanted to be away from drabness and to stretch my limbs in some mighty struggle. I was only happy in the woods, and when the ecstatic Florida springtime came strolling from the sea, trance-glorifying the world with its aura. Then I hid out in the tall wild oats that waved like a glinty veil. I nibbled sweet oat stalks and listened to the wind sighing and sighing through the crowns of the lofty pines. (40-41)

In order to understand Hurston's establishing her own position as both an *insider* and an *outsider* in this passage, it must be remembered that her early life was the opposite of Richard's. Zora had a good family life, and her closeness to her mother and other relatives is without question during her early years. Thus, "tricking" the elders into believing in her religious zeal while she actually searched the Bible for passages about the "facts of life" is her first unique stance of creating her own distance from the traditions of her village. Immediately following this unusual use of the Bible, Hurston describes her artistic inspirations by showing her desire to be "with the gods," but not in a religious sense—rather, in the artistic sense of Valhalla and Hercules, European literary figures

unconnected to black folklore or folk art. The love of "the ecstatic Florida springtime" and "tall wild oats" expressed by Florida's greatest black ethnographer is here contrasted to the "drabness" of "morning grits," "raking yards and carrying out chamber pots." In a wonderful way, thus Hurston creates a distance between her parents' religion and herself as well as between the everyday life of Florida and herself, while at the same time aligning herself with the gods of art and a muse. But while thus emphasizing her being an outsider, she remains a true insider in Florida, in her family and with her folks, as also been observed by Domina: "she is situated as both insider and outsider" (Domina 198).

Lakatos also describes the contrast between his educated self as a writer and his family background in terms centering around their religious or superstitious beliefs. Upon his return home after a half-year's absence, Boncza finds himself torn between an abhorrence of his family's superstitious beliefs and a desire for the warmth of his home. The attraction of the returning son for his home emphasizes his closeness: "I have never felt so strong a desire for my home. While I was far away, I somehow managed without it, but now that I was approaching my home, I kept my mind on it ... My mother expressed her happiness [upon my arrival] by a stifled scream" (337).<sup>22</sup> But the sweetness of the return is spoiled by Boncza's shock at the superstition that still pervades the family. They believe in certain things to do during lightning, such as turning the mirrors to face the wall and staying in darkness, in order not to call upon themselves the anger of god. It is important to state that it is not the family's poverty, simplicity, or traditions that make Boncza feel an outsider. Rather, it is these superstitious beliefs that are contrasted to his educated self in his conversation with his father:

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<sup>22</sup> "Soha nem éreztem ilyen vágyat az otthon után. Amíg messze voltam, valahogy kibírtam nélküle, de ahogy bekerültem vonzási körébe, már nem tudtam szabadulni a gondolatától ... anyám egy halk jajszóval adott hangot boldogságának" (337).

'if lightning were attracted by bright light, they would hit the heavens and not the earth, where there is eternal darkness,' [I said]. 'You are the one going to school,' said my father, looking at the lantern with thoughtful eyes. (340)<sup>23</sup>

His return home brings out the contrast between a loving family and a different worldview he has acquired. And while he engages in the above conversation with his father, it is clear that Boncza feels the pain of this split very deeply. Unlike Dee, whose return in "Everyday Use" was marked by demonstrative criticism of the way her Mama "still lived," Boncza considerately refrains from interfering, attesting to his love and appreciation of his family in spite of this disagreement: "I left everything as it was, the mirror facing the wall and the darkness suggesting lifelessness, all these in an attempt to fool god" (338).<sup>24</sup> Inside, however, he feels a painful distance: "How much time and what distance separated me from them! The years I spent at school grew a hundred-fold" (338).<sup>25</sup> So, his position is also defined as both an outsider and an insider, growing unto him from the deepest recesses of religious desires. It is at this point of the book that Lakatos starts emphasizing his education, and his new ways of looking at his childhood community. From this point on, he stays at home with his family, but continues his education in the city, thus experiencing more and more this painful chasm between the "desire for home" and the "years spent at school." This part of the book abounds with passages of contrast that portray the lifestyles of his childhood community with the explanations of a professional writer's extra understanding and criticism.

As Péliné did not become a writer until old age, she does not directly address her artistic development in her autobiography. Yet, she calls attention to her personality, that

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<sup>23</sup> "Ha a villámokat a fényesség vonzaná, akkor a mennyországba csapkodnának, nem a földre, ahol örök sötétség van,' [mondtam]. 'Tik jártok iskolába,' Apám elgondolkozva nézte a pislákoló mécseset" (340).

<sup>24</sup> "Hagytam mindent a maga rendjén, a falnak fordított tükörrel, a léttelenséget színlelő sötétséggel, amivel megpróbálták megtéveszteni az istent" (338).

<sup>25</sup> "Mennyi idő és mekkora távolság választ el tőlük! Azok az évek, amiket az iskolában eltöltöttem, százszorosára nőttek" (338).

made her susceptible to beauty and observation. In the following passage, she goes to visit the church on Good Friday with her family. In the church, she discovers her interest in the artwork in the church and the people around it. Thus, she shifts her position from the religious self to the artistic and ethnographic self. She observes these things differently and in a greater degree than others in her neighborhood. She becomes an artist, but one who remains part of the family while still able to observe others:

On Good Friday, we went to church very early in the morning, to look at little Jesus. But I had a great sin. I could not pray in church because there were so many things to see. There were the beautiful paintings, the sculptures, the gilded ornaments, the little plump angels, the wonderful candlesticks, and the fascinating altar. I looked at all these with awe, I relished their beauty, and they fully occupied my thoughts. Every time I started to pray, I could not even get halfway through before something beautiful came into my vision, and I forgot where I was in my prayer. ... There were hordes of people around the church. The procession began, but I did not see or feel any of it. Again, it was not prayer that occupied my attention, but the people. In such a huge crowd, there were many exciting figures. (257-258)<sup>26</sup>

It is important to emphasize that she does not simply dwell on the beauties of church art and ornaments, but shamefully admits her inability to pray there, thus establishing her distance from the proceedings. Her observation of the "hordes of people" going to church also suggests an outsider's point of view, that she here introduces by calling attention to her "great sin." But she remains fully an insider to her family, of course, emphasizing her closeness to her mother and sisters during the Easter celebrations described. A few lines below the passage quoted, she describes the preparations for

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<sup>26</sup> "Nagypénteken kora reggel mentünk a templomba imádkozni, a Jézuskát megnézni. De nekem volt egy nagy bűnöm. A templomban nem tudtam imádkozni, annyi nézivaló akadt. A csodálatos festmények, szobrok, az aranyozott díszítések, a pufók kis angyalkák, csodás gyertyatartók, gyönyörűséges oltár. Ezeket áhítattal néztem, és gyönyörködtem bennük, gondolataimat teljesen lekötötték, és ahányszor elkezdtem imádkozni, még a felét sem tudtam elmondani, mert már megint valami szép a szemem elé került, és máris elfelejtettem, hogy hol tartottam az imámban ... A templom körül csak úgy hömpölyögtek az emberek. Megkezdődött a körmenet, amiből én sajnos semmit sem láttam, meg nem is éreztem. Megint nem az ima kötötte le a figyelmemet, hanem az emberek. Ilyen nagy tömegben világi formákat lehetett felfedezni" (257 – 258).

Easter celebrations as getting ready together with her sisters: "My sisters dressed up very nicely. I, thank God, got a nice new spring jacket for Easter. Rózsi made me a nice little hat" (258).<sup>27</sup> But art seems to have more importance for her than the celebrations, as she continues: "I looked like an actress. Back then I could only think in terms of actresses" (258).<sup>28</sup> And in the second half of the celebrations, she starts to emphasize her distance from her sisters:

They were busy with their girlfriends. They told me to go with them, but their conversation did not interest me. I was much happier alone. I could observe the people as much as I liked, which was always a great amusement to me. I was not only interested in the outside appearance of people, but I had a desire to get to know their inner lives as well. ... God was very smart in creating people of so many different sizes and colors. ... I loved people very much, always having a desire to get to know more of them than what my narrow surroundings allowed. (259-260)<sup>29</sup>

Thus, while Hilda celebrates a religious holiday in unison with her family and friends, she also establishes her distance through her loneliness and her desire for more than what her "narrow surroundings" allowed. Her authorial position is thus also that of a true insider while also an outsider.

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<sup>27</sup> "Testvéreim szép csinosan felöltöztek. Én hál' istennek húsvétra kaptam szép új tavaszi kabátot. Rózsi aranyos kis kalapot csinált nékem" (258).

<sup>28</sup> "Úgy néztem ki, mint egy színésznő. Akkor még csak színésznőkben tudtam gondolkozni" (258).

<sup>29</sup> "Ők a barátnőikkel voltak elfoglalva, nékem meg hiába mondták, hogy tartsak velük, engem már nem kötött le a társalgásuk, magányosan sokkal jobban éreztem magam. Kedvemre nézhettem az embereket, ami mindig nagy szórakozás volt számomra. Nemcsak az emberek külső megjelenése érdekelt egyes emberek lelkivilágát szerettem volna megismerni. ... Nagyon okos volt a Jóisten, amikor ilyen különböző méretű, színű embereket teremtett. ... Nagyon szerettem az embereket, mindig többet szerettem volna megtudni róluk, mint ami szűk kis környezetemben megengedett" (259-260).

## ***Chapter 1. The Mother Characters: Representations of Complex Ties to Cultures***

I will study the roles of the mother characters from two aspects: On the one hand, the mothers directly influenced the art of their children. In the cases of Hurston and Péliné, it meant traditions of creativity and sensitivity that were the background against which the daughters expressed themselves as professional artists. In the cases of Wright and Lakatos, the mother characters were influential in the education and thus the professional development of the sons, allowing them to become writers of books about their cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, the relationships with the mothers map the complex relationships with the past and with the cultures, marking the writers' positions as being both insiders and outsiders. Simultaneously belonging to their old culture and "rising" out of it, the sons and daughters have the vantage points of both an "original" insider and an "objective" outsider. Thus, the mothers' role is both creating the possibility of self-expression through written forms of art and showing the complexities of relating to an emotionally charged past. A study of the mother characters thus emphasizes the autoethnographic elements of the texts, making them available and informative to readers of different cultural backgrounds.

### **Zora's Mother: Culture and Distance**

Zora Neale Hurston portrays her mother as a strong woman who gave her the artistic legacy Alice Walker writes about. While we do not see the mother's artistic inclinations directly, there are clear signs in the narrative that Mama's personality inspired Zora's artistic and educational development in both the ways seen in Walker's

writings. Mama literally encouraged Zora's education, imagination, and artistic development. This is most obviously stated in the famous sentences: "Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to 'jump at de sun.' We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground. Papa did not feel so hopeful" (13). But in a more indirect way, Mama created a legacy that enabled Hurston to become an ethnographer, studying, describing, and popularizing the folk traditions in a way that inspired, among others, Alice Walker. This legacy can best be understood by a close study of Mama's unfulfilled final wish on her deathbed.

Hurston's most significant literary achievement, her studies of folk tales and folk art, is clearly rooted in her childhood experiences of listening to story-telling men on the porch, the background of these formative moments also being her mother, who "waited on me for the sugar and coffee to finish off dinner, until she lifted her voice over the tree tops in a way to let me know that her patience was gone" (48). The patience gone suggests a patience that endured during her eavesdropping on stories that were not intended for a young girl to hear. These stories are about sexuality—for example, about the way men should grow their mustaches, and about race issues—for example, about how various groups of people received their colors from God. Hurston considers these early stories heard on the porch so important to her artistic development that she includes a few of them in her narrative, breaking up its unity with one of the few occasions when she addresses the reader directly: "how and why Sis Snail quit her husband, for instance. You may or may not excuse my lagging feet, if you know the circumstances of the case" (48). The artistic influences these stories had on her are made clear by Hurston's continuing these descriptions with stories she made up herself. Her first audience and

encouragement was her mother: "[I] dashed into the kitchen and told Mama how the lake had talked with me" (53).

As Zora's growing up is described, the role of imagination leading her beyond the constraints of Eatonville life is emphasized. She describes her desire for knowledge and exploration as originating in her mother's room: "I had been yearning for so many months to find out about the end of things. I had no doubts about the beginnings. They were somewhere in the five acres that was home to me. Most likely in Mama's room. Now, I was going to see the end, and then I would be satisfied" (27-28). It is clearly stated that Zora's imagination and knowledge were stronger than usual. She sets herself apart from her friends in this respect—for example, from Carrie Roberts, who eventually declined to go with her to find the horizon. Even though some of her playmates "liked the idea and joined in the game" (61) when she invented stories, it is clear that Zora was the ground-breaker, at least as far as imagination and stories went. The first impersonation of an ear of corn in "Miss Corn-Shuck" also comes from working with her mother: "I was around while Mama was shucking corn" (54). She thus portrays her imagination as originating from her mother, clearly distinct from her grandmother's attempts to stifle Zora's imagination. She asks her mother about one of her dream-like stories: "Wasn't that nice? My mother said that it was" (53). This may not seem a particularly vivid encouragement on the part of her mother, but the contrast with the grandmother shows how significant the silent patience of her mother was. The grandmother "had known slavery and to her, [my] brazenness was unthinkable" (34), therefore, she "glared [...] like open-faced hell and snorted" (53) when Zora was describing her imagined conversations with birds, lakes, and trees. So, the earliest inclinations for story-telling, imagination, and

exploration are linked to her mother, who "battered down walls" by the simple fact that "Mama never tried to break me. She'd listen sometimes, and sometimes she wouldn't. But she never seemed displeased. But her mother used to foam at the mouth" (54).

Zora's development as an artist was also influenced by the more formal ways of acculturation: education and religion. Again, it was the mother who made sure that Zora received the proper impetus, even when Zora's education was taking her in directions that the mother could not have experienced or understood. In a scene reminiscent of Walker's mother's ironing and starching of white shirts, Zora's mother also made sure that her education was accompanied by proper attire: "Mama saw to it that my shoes were on the right feet, since I was careless about left and right" (37). The mother carefully guarded Zora's reward for being a good student, thus underlining the special significance she attached to her daughter's formal education. Hurston describes the happiness she felt upon receiving a few pennies for her good performance at school, linking it to her future artistic accomplishments: "Perhaps, I shall never experience such joy again. The nearest thing to that moment was the telegram accepting my first book" (38). But it was the mother who carefully channeled Zora's early development, as shown by the attention she gave to the pennies: "Mama let me lay with my pennies for a while, then put them away for me to keep" (38).

We can thus see that the mother was extremely influential in the development of Hurston as an artist, even if Mama did not always know in what direction her encouragement and legacy would take her daughter. Through formal and informal ways, she led Zora "across mined fields" that would help her become a famous educated writer and ethnographer. But besides the direct influences of listening to stories, development of

imagination, receiving of formal education, and getting involved in the world of religion, the mother's role can be discovered in the more subtle way of influencing Zora's personal development, the definition of her self with respect to the culture from which she came and which she was to describe. Studying the image of the Sun in Hurston's autobiography, Deborah G. Plant explains that the mother's contribution to Zora's development was primarily the creation of a personality, a self, that had the determination to carry out her dreams of education, knowledge, and art:

When her mother exhorted her to 'jump at the sun,' she, in essence, was advising Zora Neale to immerse in Self – not the lowercase self of human identity and personality, but the capitalized Self of spirit and consciousness ... If Hurston's mother did not articulate this cosmological philosophy in words, she certainly demonstrated it in her actions and her adamant determination to protect Zora Neale from those who would 'squinch her spirit.' (Plant 14)

While Plant studies how the "sun symbolizes spirit," with "'spirit' [referenced] more than twenty-five times" (Plant 14) in Hurston's autobiography, I believe that the full legacy of the mother can be appreciated by a study of her final deathbed wish. This incident demonstrates that Zora's artistic legacy was not simply the story of a strong and imaginative self fighting her way through education to fame but also the story of what Grobbel calls the minority writers' "keen awareness of their particular position as cultural insiders and outsiders" (Grobbel 142). The particular and contradictory situation that Mama (knowingly or not) creates on her deathbed for Zora helps to define not only her spirited personality but also her special and frequently criticized position with respect to her culture and race.

The dying mother asks the nine-year-old Zora not to let others do certain traditional things around her deathbed:

I was not to let them take the pillow from under her head until she was dead. The clock was not to be covered, nor the looking-glass. She trusted me to see to it that

these things were not done. I promised her as solemnly as nine years could do, that I would see to it. (64)

But of course, it was impossible for Zora to tell the adults what to do around the dying mother. The scene is worth quoting at length because of the significance of Zora's feelings to her future development:

As I crowded in, they lifted up the bed and turned it around so that Mama's eyes would face the east. I thought that she looked to me as the head of the bed was reversed. Her mouth was slightly open, but her breathing took up so much of her strength that she could not talk. But she looked to me, or so I felt, to speak for her. She depended on me for a voice ... I was to agonize over that moment for years to come. In the midst of play, in wakeful moments after midnight, on the way home from parties, and even in the classroom during lectures. My thoughts would escape occasionally from their confines and stare me down. Now, I know that I could not have had my way against the world. The world we lived in required those acts. Anything else would have been sacrilege, and no nine-year-old voice was going to thwart them. (66)

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his "Afterword" to *Dust Tracks on a Road* celebrates the first half of this passage, writing that "Hurston represents her final moments with her mother in terms of the search for voice" (290). Gates goes on to praise Hurston for the "density of intimate experiences she cloaked in richly elaborated imagery" (292) and explains that her "mythic realism, lush and dense within a lyrical black idiom, seemed politically retrograde to the proponents of a social and critical realism" (291). However, a careful reading of the full deathbed scene quoted above reveals that Zora's legacy is not simply about rich imagery and black idiom but also about the contradictory position of any minority writer reporting on her own ethnographic tradition. In that sense, Gates's statement that "Few authors in the black tradition have less in common than Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright" can be seen as one that may be true about black idiom and social realism, but not about the depths of the author's personality revealed between the lines of an autobiographical self-revelation.

In order to understand the full extent of Mama's role in Zora's development, the contradictions in the deathbed scene must be revealed. On her deathbed, knowingly or not, Mama places a painful legacy on Zora's shoulders. She creates a rift between Zora and her surviving relatives, who "restrained me physically from outraging the ceremonies established for the dying" (66). By the same token, Mama establishes a "sisterhood" with Zora, entrusting her with a final wish and forming a secret alliance. Interestingly, this alliance between mother and daughter is in defiance of certain folk traditions, that may seem interesting to an ethnographer but are irritating to the dying woman. So, the passage, even as Hurston describes the very traditions she was asked to thwart, reveals a contradictory attitude to folk customs, undermining any hegemonic attitude towards them and emphasizing that they may mean very different things to members of even the same family. In this case, the mother becomes an outsider as she is unwilling to submit herself to the local customs. The rift between the mother and the locals, in which Zora finds herself caught, interestingly foreshadows Hurston's main message about black unity and race issues. The whole basis of her work is that she does not think in terms of a unified race: "Our lives are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover us all, except My people! My people!" (192). "My people! My people!" being an expression symbolizing the differences among African Americans, as detailed in great detail in Chapter 12.

But going beyond this rift between Mama and the others, another rift is opened up by Mama's final wish, the one between herself and Zora. While the mother seems to have involved her daughter in a secret agreement, the impossibility of complying with her wish

created between herself and Zora "a promise unfulfilled" (Plant 18), about which Zora agonized for years to come. The pain and difficulty of losing her mother at a young age were increased by this impossible request.

Nevertheless, it takes only a few more pages for Hurston to dwell on her mourning, and soon state with a surprising authorial turn: "I accepted my bereavement" (71). In this way, she writes her mother "out of the book", and contrasts herself with her sister, who "moped a great deal" (73). This is true in spite of the fact that the next chapter is about her fight with her stepmother, her attempt to defend her mother's position. In this way, Hurston creates a subject position of herself that mirrors the position she takes about blacks in general. Just as there is no racial unity, there is a distance between herself and her mother in spite of the fact that she is closer to Mama than any of her siblings. Zora is the only person close enough to Mama to know the secrets of her dying hours; yet, she is far enough from Mama to know her own innocence and accept her bereavement. Zora, in this most personal and most painful aspect of her life, thus feels the very essence of the race issue she writes about.

Thus Zora is able to put herself into the very crux of her message about race and folklore, displaying a truly insider position not only on the level of knowledge but also on the level of feeling and understanding. But at the same time, she can also occupy an outsider's position, as shown by her stance against both the family and Mama. In this sense, at the beginning of her autobiography, the scene of the mother's death establishes Zora as an all-around auto-ethnographer, occupying an insider-outsider position similar to that of Dee, the returning daughter in "Everyday Use." She has distanced herself (both emotionally and physically) from her mother and her culture enough to be an "objective"

outsider, but at the same time, she still retains the knowledge and involvement of a "feeling" insider. This position thus set out at the beginning is reinforced later in the book, and serves to establish Zora's image as the returning daughter. But, being an ethnographer of African-American folklore, she is also able to become an example of her widely disputed attitudes towards race issues. She makes her own self an example of her argument about the complexity of her race and her culture:

I have been a Negro three times—a Negro baby, a Negro girl and a Negro woman. Still, if you have received no clear cut impression of what the Negro in America is like, then you are in the same place with me. There is no *The Negro* here. Our lives are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover us all except My people! My people! (192)

### **Richard's Mother: Strictness and Alienation**

The overall image of Richard's mother in *Black Boy* is that of an extremely strict and mostly distant person. Critics studying the mother's influence on her son's development have usually found her persona negative, weak, or cold. Hakutani ponders whether or not Richard had any genuine feelings towards his mother (Hakutani 114), and seems to agree with DuBois's opinion that he did not. Denissova describes her as a "dominating mother" (Denissova 244), whose role in the book seems to be a "goal of containment" necessary for a "black boy's" survival in the Jim Crow South. Timothy Dow Adams also considers the mother's character as "designed not to make the persona appear admirable but to make Richard Wright into 'black boy'" (Adams 72), thus suggesting that the mother's role is to acculturate Richard rather than enable his unique personal development. For this reason, Adams suggests, the author altered the characterization of his mother from what she really was like: "[T]o underplay his own

family's middle-class ways and more positive values[,] Wright does not mention that his mother was a successful school teacher" (Adams 205). Andrew Delbanco emphasizes the mother's weakness, as she "sank into invalidism and despair," in contrast to the "brilliance" of her son, who "began to find literary expression during his schooling" (Delbanco 29). As all these critics seem to suggest, the character of the mother as presented in *Black Boy* is not a fully developed African American character, but rather serves as a representative of the reprehensible social system against which Richard's entire life is directed in the book. She oscillates between the harsh discipline she levels on the young Richard, preparing him for the cruel world in which he lives, and the weakness resulting from her illness, which position strengthens Richard's individual determination as he is growing up.

In spite of this probably distorted and inadequate representation of Mrs. Wright in *Black Boy*, it is worthwhile to study her role in defining Richard's artistic development and Wright's portrayal of his childhood world. She stands out from among other characters in the book in that she is directly influential in the unique development of Richard as an artist. In spite of her strict personality and personal problems, Mrs. Wright is described as pivotal in promoting Richard's education and mostly supportive even of his unusual desires for reading and for going away to the North. But even more importantly, Richard's ambivalent relationship with his mother illustrates the pains and contradictions in Southern life. Wright's portrayal of the embattled mother character enables him to describe Richard's position as a thoroughly involved insider in the community he attempts to flee throughout the book, while also being an educated outsider with extra insights.

The cruelty of the mother, particularly in the early sections of the book, shows the cruel world in which Richard will have to live. She cruelly teaches Richard and prepares him for the rough life in the South. She makes him go out to the streets where the boys are waiting to beat him up. She teaches him a ruthless lesson after he has killed a cat to spite his father. The mother does not seem to exhibit any motherly feelings of mercy or tenderness as she makes Richard bury the kitten in the frightening darkness of the night. Nevertheless, a comparison with Hurston's Mama reveals some striking similarities not studied before. While the whippings may seem extraordinary at times, particularly to today's readers, we must bear in mind that Hurston's mother also "insisted on good behavior and didn't think twice about applying peach hickories to backsides" (Plant 13). Besides, even though Zora's father did not abandon the family like Richard's did, it is clear that the mother "did a yeoman's part" (Plant 13) in both families. John Hurston's frequent absence from the life of the family is referred to by Hurston, while Nathan Wright left his family altogether. Thus, the harsh treatment received by the child Richard at his mother's hands does not in itself mean a total alienation or separation from her; it rather shows the extremely difficult conditions under which she had to support her children, as well as her determination to make the best of the situation. In that regard, at least, she resembles the African American woman's perseverance and hard work celebrated by Walker. Her continued presence in Richard's life, even in the second volume describing his adult life, amply shows that their relationship endured in spite of her mostly negative portrayal in the book.

A careful reading reveals significant differences between descriptions of Richard's mother and other family members, particularly the grandmother. If the family forms the

first community of Richard's childhood, from which he is increasingly alienated, then that community is certainly not to be seen as a homogeneous entity. Hence, Richard's alienation should not be seen in a totalizing fashion, but rather the complexity of his community and his relationships must be kept in mind. There is a significant contrast in both Hurston's and Wright's narratives between the grandmother and the mother characters. In Hurston's narrative, we have seen, the mother is in stark contrast to the old-fashioned grandmother. In Wright's book, the difference is more subtle, but noticeable. On the surface, it seems that the mother supports the grandmother and other family members in their stance against Richard's non-religious and rebellious views and behavior. However, there are some subtle hints to suggest that Mrs. Wright was more understanding of her son. For example, when Richard secures a Saturday job to finance his education, in spite of his grandmother's objections on religious grounds, the mother expresses sympathy even as she is seriously ill. Wright suggests that there is a hidden approval by the mother of Richard's defiant behavior towards the family: "Now I was truly dead to Granny and Aunt Addie, but my mother smiled when I told her that I had defied them. She rose and hobbled to me on her paralytic legs and kissed me" (144). Just as Zora's mother defended her daughter's imagination against a strict grandmother, Richard's mother kisses her son for rejecting the grandmother in favor of supporting his own education.

Mrs. Wright's interest in Richard's education is obvious from the outset. She takes his formal education seriously, sending him to school whenever the broken family's dire financial circumstances allow. Her first reaction upon securing a miserable job is to make her sons return to school: "My mother luckily secured a job in a white doctor's office at

the unheard-of-wages of five dollars per week and at once she announced that her 'sons were going to school again.' I was happy" (74). In fact, earlier, it was the mother who taught Richard to read before he even had a chance to attend school. In an important scene among many negative encounters between mother and son, the mother's personal attention to Richard creates a sense of family bonding and appreciation uncharacteristic of their relationship in the novel. In the following passage, first, the mother is surprised at her son's ability to count, second, she actively teaches him to read, and third, she introduces him to reading stories, an activity that will later figure so prominently among Richard's desires and among his clashes with his family:

When my mother returned from her job that night I insisted that she stand still and listen while I counted to one hundred. She was dumbfounded. After that she taught me to read, told me stories. On Sundays I would read the newspapers with my mother guiding me and spelling out the words. (23)

The importance of these few lines is exactly their contrast with the overall negative image of the mother's character. Certainly, the passage does not alter that image; rather, it shows that Wright used the characterization of his mother to position his great desire for reading and stories as rooted in his family background in spite of the family's generally antagonistic attitude towards these dreams. Since he later repeatedly asserts his alienation as a writer from his family, it is significant that at the root of his love for words stands the mother herself.

There are several instances in which the mother's role in teaching her son about the ways of the world is direct. There are long conversations between mother and son, in which the emphasis is usually on the queries of the son, and the mother, more or less reluctantly, tells him about things he had to know. She tells him about the coming of the war after Richard's queries about soldiers he has seen on the streets: "I asked my mother

what the war was about and she spoke of England, France, Russia, Germany, of men dying, but the reality of it was too vast and alien for me to be moved or further interested" (57). At another time, Richard sees a chain-gang, and, confusing zebras with elephants, believes that the men in striped clothes are elephants. Again, a long conversation ensues in which the mother informs him as best as she can about this institution. While in both these and other similar instances Wright emphasizes his own probing nature and the mother's often reluctant answers, the unusually long conversations also reveal her patience and desire to educate her son.

Richard's first experience with novels stresses the mother's role in his artistic development. It is important to know that the grandmother forbade all such readings on strict religious grounds. Nevertheless, a boarding schoolteacher at the grandmother's house, Ella, tells Richard the story of Bluebeard, prompting the boy to later steal into her room and read some more of Ella's story books. He states, significantly, that this was "the first experience in my life that had elicited from me a total emotional response" (40). Jennifer H. Poulos describes the scene: "Granny screams, equating imaginative literature with evil, but Richard is already fascinated" (Poulos 62). And his fascination is not to be conquered by the grandmother's injunctions or by the mother's seeming acquiescence to her will. Ironically, but significantly, Richard uses his mother to further his reading knowledge: "Usually I could not decipher enough words to make the story have meaning. I burned to learn to read novels and I tortured my mother into telling me the meaning of every strange word I saw" (40). Thus, we can see that the mother, who had tortured him earlier for writing foul words on the wall, now apparently lets herself be tortured to tell him the meaning of strange words that lead him into the "forbidden and enchanting land"

his grandmother proscribed. With this example, Wright creates another important situation that does not contradict the book's overall emphasis on his personal individuality and strength, but also connects his imagination and art to his mother.

While the mother is thus influential in Richard's education and instrumental to his artistic development, her special role in the narrative also maps the "mined fields" of Richard's tenuous relationship to his background. On the one hand, her negative behavior and attitude towards Richard shows the extent of his alienation, his distance, from his world. On the other hand, the raw pain the mother allows Richard to experience, unlike other mothers who try to shelter their sons and give them some comfort in this cruel society, makes Richard feel and experience the depths to which the effects of discrimination penetrate his life. In other words, Richard's frequent affirmations of his distance from his mother make him an outside observer of her world, while the constant pain she causes him make him an emotional insider. Thus, unlike Zora's mother, Richard's mother does not offer any artistic approaches to make the world more bearable. Jay Mechling states that she "actively discouraged conversations of the sort black children must learn in order to acquire Signifyin(g) as a skill for living" (Mechling 290). Rather, she represents the world itself, a world in which Richard is alienated from white dominance and black subservience as well. Her responses and acts, involving "no language games" (Mechling 291), simply mirror the stark hostility of the world Richard describes. The mother being a part of that world, Wright suggests that the hostility and difficulties of the Jim Crow South have penetrated his life as much as possible.

But this distance between Richard, a probing young man trying to understand his lopsided environment, and his mother, a representative of the hostile outside world,

allows Wright to portray both the feelings of growing up in Jim Crow South and the facts of that world. Adams studies the effects of the mother's unusual attitude on Richard's personality, calling attention to how she gave him the facts but withheld feelings and attitudes:

Whenever the narrator questions his mother about racial relationships, she is defensive and evasive. "I knew that there was something my mother was holding back," he notes. "She was not concealing facts, but feelings, attitudes, convictions which she did not want me to know," a misrepresentation that disturbs "black boy" who later says, "My personality was lopsided; my knowledge of feeling was far greater than my knowledge of fact." Although the narrator holds back or conceals facts, he is usually straightforward about emotional feelings. (Adams 77)

While the mother did not conceal facts but feelings, Wright states that his knowledge of feelings was greater than his knowledge of facts. Thus, the mother cannot be "blamed" for his apparent lack of knowledge, as Richard was better equipped with what the mother was concealing than what she was revealing. This apparent contradiction illustrates exactly the role of the mother in the development of Richard's art. She was pragmatic and cruel in her dealings with Richard, but seemed to hold back feelings and attitudes towards life in the South. But it is exactly this lack of talking about feelings and language games - that both Adams and Mechling miss in her - that created a "lopsided" personality in Richard. This is painful, but perfectly represents the "lopsided" nature of living in the South, characteristic of not only the mother but other blacks as well, who lived the double-faced life of seeming acquiescence to Jim Crow norms of behavior, but having a constant grievance inside. While Richard's friends did not seem to be bothered by this double way of living, Richard's mother's unusually strict and pragmatic behavior made him more painfully aware of the pains caused by living in this society. Knowingly or not, the mother, by not trying to shield Richard from the pains and contradictions of Southern life, made him feel the pains more keenly than those other black boys whose sheltered

homes made them able to forget the overall hopeless life around them. In this way, the mother contributed to Richard's ability to "think out each tiny item of racial experience in the light of the whole race problem" (196), but inability to understand "how on earth they could laugh so freely, trying to grasp the miracle that gave their debased lives the semblance of human existence" (198). In this way, what Mechling calls the "failure of folklore" in *Black Boy* is in fact the ability of Wright to critically but punctiliously describe the language games and habits of others.

Henry Louis Gates contrasts the deathbed scene of Zora's mother with that of Wright:

We can begin to understand the rhetorical distance that separated Hurston from her contemporaries if we compare this passage with a similar scene published just three years later in *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, Hurston's dominant black male contemporary and rival: 'Once, in the night, my mother called me to her bed and told me that she could not endure the pain, and she wanted to die. I held her hand and begged her to be quiet. That night I ceased to react to my mother; my feelings were frozen.' If Hurston represents her final moments with her mother in terms of the search for voice, then Wright attributes to a similar experience a certain 'somberness of spirit that I was never to lose,' which 'grew into a symbol in my mind gathering to itself ... the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness.' (Gates, "Afterword" 290)

However, in spite of the "rhetorical distance" emphasized by Gates, it is worthwhile to notice that the mothers' roles in the two scenes quoted are not at all dissimilar. In both scenes, the mother is about to "disappear" from the life of the protagonist; nevertheless, both mothers leave an artistic legacy behind. Both mothers have some negative connotations (putting Zora into an impossible situation and driving Richard into emotional coldness), yet, in strange ways, it is the negativity in both cases that drives the protagonists towards their particular ways of becoming artists.

We have seen how the contradiction in Zora's mother's wish helps Zora to become an ethnographer. It is necessary to read the entire section quoted from Wright in order to understand his mother's role in his development as an artist.

At the age of twelve, before I had one full year of formal schooling, I had a conception of life that no experience would ever erase, a predilection for what was real that no argument could ever gainsay, a sense of the world that was mine and mine alone, a notion as to what life meant that no education could ever alter, a conviction that the meaning of living came only one when was struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering.

At the age of twelve I had had an attitude toward life that was to endure, that was to make me seek those areas of living that would keep it alive, that was to make me skeptical of everything while seeking everything, tolerant of all and yet critical. The spirit I had caught gave me insight into the sufferings of others, made me gravitate toward those whose feelings were like my own, made me sit for hours while others told me of their lives, made me strangely tender and cruel, violent and peaceful.

It made me want to drive coldly to the heart of every question and lay it open to the core of suffering I knew I would find there. It made me love burrowing into psychology, into realistic and naturalistic fiction and art, into those whirlpools of politics that had the power to claim the whole of men's souls. It directed my loyalties to the side of men in rebellion; it made me love talk that sought answers to questions that could help nobody, that could only keep alive in me that enthralling sense of wonder and awe in the face of the drama of human feeling which is hidden by the external drama of life. (100-101)

These paragraphs, following immediately the scene described by Gates, contain all the main elements of Wright's artistic development. A close examination of the passage reveals the often misunderstood role of Wright's mother in the development of Richard. First, we must dispense with the general understanding that "that night I ceased to react to my mother" refers to her expulsion from Richard's emotional life once and for all. In fact, the major difference between the two passages Gates compares is that while Hurston's mother actually dies, Richard's mother survives and continues to be present throughout his life, even into the second volume, the years in Chicago. There are plenty of instances in the book where Richard 'reacts' to his mother in later chapters, with feelings that are not frozen. For example, a few years later, after he is baptized into his

mother's church, he says, "I used to lie awake at nights and think back to the early days in Arkansas, tracing my mother's life, reliving events, wondering why she had apparently been singled out for so much suffering, meaningless suffering, and I would feel more awe than I had ever felt in church" (156). This and other passages of rethinking his mother's life with understanding and sympathy are in contrast to Wright's assessment of his father's betrayal, and do not warrant Claudia Tate's reading of Wright's "urtext of matricidal impulse" and "his reactions of initial ambivalence and subsequent hostility" (Tate 96). In fact, it is exactly the mother's continuous presence throughout the book that makes her role special. Unlike Zora, who "accepted her bereavement" and closed the chapter on her mother after her death, Wright continues to struggle with the mother's legacy, and she remains the main representative of the cruel outside world Wright rejects but still remains attached to.

Reading the passage further, we discover that the "somberness of spirit" initiated by his mother's helpless illness was not only a "symbol in my mind gathering to itself ... the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness" but also an urge towards understanding, "struggling to wring a meaning out of meaningless suffering." Even before he had a full year of formal schooling, the suffering of his mother and the painful relationship between them has initiated in him a desire for knowledge and understanding. Anthony Dykema-VanderArk believes that this "sets him apart from other people" (Dykema-VanderArk 2), but Wright, who usually portrays himself as an isolated and alienated person, here emphasizes his integration into a community, as he started to "gravitate towards those whose feelings were like [his] own." Thus, the mother indirectly creates the bonds that are missing from his life. Further, his thoughts on the mother drive him towards

psychology and literature in order to understand the human soul better. We can thus see how his mother, "without knowing a word of it," encourages Richard's probing nature towards understanding, relationships, and psychology. And, as the mother stays with her son throughout the book, she can later become an example for a member of the "oppressed classes," as the communist Wright tests some ideas against the understanding of his uneducated mother:

I brooded upon the fact that I had not been able to meet her simple challenge. I looked again at the cover of the *Masses* and I knew that the wild cartoon did not reflect the passions of the common people. I reread the magazine and was convinced that much of the expression embodied what the *artists* thought would appeal to others, what they thought would gain recruits. They had a program, an ideal, but they had not yet found a language. (320)

The contradictory role of the mother in Richard's artistic development can also be seen in the boy's attitude towards religion. The contrast between the unreasonable, almost extremist, religiosity of the grandmother and the more mainstream piety of the mother represents the subtle difference between the two, even as Richard rejects both religions. In another emotionally charged scene, Richard finally allows himself to be baptized into his mother's church. Throughout, he emphasizes his emotional distance from the mother and the entire proceedings: "The mothers knelt. My mother grabbed my hands and I felt hot tears scalding my fingers. I tried to stifle my disgust" (153). While the church and the mother want to make the baptism into a sign of love for the mothers—"Don't you love your old crippled mother, Richard?" (154) she asks—Wright refuses to be emotionally seduced, saying, "I don't feel a thing" (155). Nevertheless, while the mother fails to elicit emotions from him towards herself, she succeeds in eliciting emotions towards others. His main argument for allowing himself to be baptized is to belong to "the boys of my gang" (151), and, unlike in most of the book, here he sees belonging to a group as very

important. In the baptism scene, when the mother forces him (by emotional stress) to be baptized, she (unwittingly) creates a community for him that he hardly ever experiences elsewhere in the book. He feels closer to the other baptized boys, if for no other reason than in their shared lack of faith. So, it is a community of lack of faith, but a community nevertheless, a home but an unhomely home. He describes the church-goers as a "tight little black community" (154), a "tribe" which "was asking us whether we shared its feelings; if we refused to join the church, it was equivalent to saying no, to placing ourselves in the position of moral monsters" (154). Whitted's assessment of the situation, that "Wright also stresses the betrayal of elders, particularly mothers, whose exhortations to believe act as a hindrance to his young protagonists' full understanding of manhood, human dignity, and race pride" (Whitted 14), can be augmented by saying that it is precisely the "betrayal" of mothers that brings the boys together into a gang and ironically creates an understanding among them.

Through her interest in Richard's formal education, explaining things of the world to him, and encouraging his reading of stories, the mother directly promotes Richard's artistic development. But even more importantly, Wright's portrayal of her as one who does not soften the harsh realities of Richard's environment allows the presentation of the depth to which living in Jim Crow South affects Richard's personal life, while at the same time creating a distance between Richard and his childhood environment.

## **Hilda's Mother: Culture and Closeness**

Among the four heroes discussed in this thesis, Péliné's Hilda is the only person who did not receive a substantial formal education. Nevertheless, the value she places on creativity, art, imagination, and education is aptly emphasized throughout the book. In fact, Hilda's mother is closest to the mother figure described by Alice Walker in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Hilda's mother, Zsuzsa Fejes, is a direct source of artistic legacy and inspiration to her daughter. In this section, I will show how Hilda's mother "battered down walls ... to discover a place" for the heroine. Zsuzsa Fejes enables the artistic development of her daughter by being an artist in the sense of Walker's mother. Just like Alice Walker's mother, Zsuzsa Fejes decorated "whatever shabby house [her family] was forced to live in," thus using her strength and hard work to create an atmosphere of self-respect and love for beauty. Moreover, even though Zsuzsa herself never received an education and shared other Romas' views of the time on the uselessness of formal education, she did much more than other Gypsy mothers to send her daughter to school and to encourage her reading and imagination after she left school. On the other hand, just like the mothers of Zora and Richard, Zsuzsa Fejes made it possible for her daughter Hilda to become an artist who is simultaneously an insider and an outsider to her culture. It was Zsuzsa's unusual openness and hospitality to people of all races that enabled Hilda to go against Gypsy customs, including her mother's views, and marry a Hungarian man. Unlike Zora and Richard, who left their homes and traditions behind by receiving an education, Hilda left her home and tradition when she married out of her race. Even though this was not encouraged by her mother, it was Zsuzsa's unusual

openness that made it possible for Hilda to remain an insider in the family even after she had left it and become an "outsider."

Similarly to the women described by Alice Walker, Péliné's mother was "Husky of voice – Stout of step:" "My mother was a very strong woman. And she was beautiful, too. At least, to me, she was very beautiful. She was tall, and weighed 113 kilos. She had beautiful wavy black hair, and smooth brown skin" (9).<sup>30</sup> This mixture of strength and beauty that Péliné sees in her mother perfectly describes her artistic legacy as well. In their homes, she created beauty out of necessity. Because of the poor conditions of their rented apartments, the mother valued cleanliness above all. So she painted the apartments herself, introducing color and beauty along with the necessary disinfections. She thus was an artist without her own space and time. Her art was within the structure of her everyday chores, adding various colors to the required painting:

Our apartment was always clean and orderly. This was all my mother's accomplishment. She was a wonderful mother. She worked day and night; she washed, ironed, stitched. My mother even painted the apartment herself. My father would go to work playing music, and my mother would start painting immediately. She ushered us, kids, into the middle of the room, pushed the furniture there, too, and got to work. By the time my father arrived home from playing music, the apartment was sparkling clean. In the old times, there were many lice and bugs, so my mother painted every month. Sometimes she painted the room blue, sometimes pink, and at other times, green. (9)<sup>31</sup>

Hilda's family, similarly to Walker's family as described in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," moved several times throughout the book, renting larger or smaller apartments according to their momentary economic conditions. In choosing the

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<sup>30</sup> "Anyám nagyon erős asszony volt, meg szép is. Legalábbis nékem nagyon szép volt. Magas asszony volt, és 113 kiló. Gyönyörű fekete, hullámos haja, sima kreol bőre volt" (9).

<sup>31</sup> "Tisztának, rendesnek mondható volt a lakásunk. Ez mind anyámnak volt köszönhető. Csodálatos anya volt. Éjjel-nappal dolgozott, mosott, vasalt, foltozott. A lakást is anyám meszelte ki. Apám ment muzsikálni, anyám már neki is látott a meszelésnek. Minket egybeterelt a szoba közepére, meg a bútorokat is odatolta, és már meszelt. Mire apám megjött a muzsikálásból, már ragyogó tisztaság volt. Régen rengeteg volt a poloska meg a bolha, ezért anyám minden hónapban festett. Hol kékre, hol meg rózsaszínűre, hol meg zöldre a szoba falait" (9).

apartments and the furniture, the mother also used whatever little means she had to creatively embellish their abodes. Péliné emphasizes that her mother's cleanliness and imaginative decorations of the apartments made her stand out among Gypsy families. The admiring looks Zsuzsa received from neighbors for her imaginative ways of keeping a nice and tidy household made the children "proud" and imaginative as well: "Our furniture was shabby; nevertheless, they said 'Zsuzsi Fejes has a very neat home.' We had only one bunk-bed, as my father called it, one table, a few chairs, a stool, and two white metal beds decorated by two painted angels, a red one and a blond one" (8).<sup>32</sup> Péliné goes into detail about how Hilda's imagination was inspired by these angels on the bed, making her invent stories about them much like Hurston's "Miss Corn-Shuck." So, the mother's ability to "make a castle out of shit" (22)<sup>33</sup> provided the children with the physical requirements of cleanliness and health, with admiring friends, and with sources for a soaring imagination.

Péliné dwells on her imagination and playfulness almost as long as Hurston does on hers. Just like Zora, Hilda was a player whose imagination was inspired by the clean, friendly background the mother created for her. In the following passage, she connects motherhood, play, imagination, and love in a way that shows that the maternal legacy was not only the ability to create art but also the ability to use art in a loving way in the service of others: "Now that I think about it, what did we play? We played sheriff, where-are-the-scissors, once-upon-a-time-a-prince, old-farmer-goes-a-mowing, I-come-from-America, and come-come-green-twig. When we played, our mothers would lean

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<sup>32</sup> "A bútorzat szedett-vedett volt, de akkor is azt mondták, hogy 'a Fejes Zsuzsinak milyen rendes otthona van!' Pedig csak egy kasznink volt – apám legalábbis annak hívta -, egy asztal, pár szék, hokedli, meg kettő fehér csőágy, aminek a közepébe angyalkák voltak festve, egy vörös meg egy szőke" (8).

<sup>33</sup> "szarból is várat tudott csinálni" (22).

against the railing and look happily upon us. They were real mothers, not like the botched ones today, these fake-mothers, who cannot love and cannot teach love" (13).<sup>34</sup> Thus, it is not a surprise that Hilda's plans gravitated towards becoming an artist, closely linked to her love and affection for her mother: "I thought myself lucky that I was only fourteen years old, so I could stay with my mother for a long time. I thought that I would never marry, I'd rather become a dancer. ... But when I told this to my mother, she wanted to hear none of it" (271).<sup>35</sup> The mother thus did not want Hilda to be an unmarried artist. In fact, she did not allow Hilda to go to a school of art, even when she was – almost miraculously – accepted into one. Nevertheless, it was the mother whose inspiration eventually led Hilda to write an autobiography that is as much about Zsuzsa Fejes as about Hilda Péliné Nyári. Zsuzsa discovered "a place" for Hilda without knowing "a page of it" herself.

The general view among Gypsies was that formal education was not important, especially for girls. But Hilda set herself apart from her sisters in this respect. Even though she ended up finishing only four grades, she stated her desire for books and knowledge from the very outset:

School was not important for girls. They only needed to cook, wash, and clean. But my mother taught them all these, so that they could marry well. So, my sisters and brothers went to school just enough to learn to read and write. They did not finish more than two or three classes. At that time, I was not yet of school age, but I loved books, and wondered why my sisters and brothers did not love them. I was ever so happy to turn the pages, I marveled at the pictures. I wished that I could go to school, too. I would be a very good student, and I would read a lot. My

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<sup>34</sup> "Ha most visszagondolok, miket játszottunk? Csendörös, hol az olló, lánc-lánc eszterlánc, egyszer egy királyfi mit gondol magában, a gazda rétre megy, Amerikából jöttem, bújj-bújj zöld ág. Ilyenkor anyáink a folyosón a rácsra támaszkodtak, és boldogan néztek minket. Akkor még igazi anyák voltak, nem ilyen elfuserált, hisztis álmanák, akik nem tudnak szeretni, és a gyerekeiket sem tudják megtanítani a szeretetre" (13).

<sup>35</sup> "Én arra gondoltam, hogy milyen jó nékem, hogy én még csak tizennégy éves vagyok, így még sokáig anyámmal lehetek, és nem megyek férjhez, inkább táncosnő leszek. ... Anyámnak hiába mondtam, hallani sem akart róla" (271).

world was very small. I could only think within the confines of our house. And of Mátyás Square. That is where my mother used to take us most. (45)<sup>36</sup>

She calls her world "small," suggesting that her desire for books would open up a wider world for herself. As this notion has become the title of her autobiographical writing, she suggests her insider/outsider position even in this passage. She has never actually left the small world into which she was born, yet she was able to write about it from the perspective of an outsider. Even though she never received a formal education, she has opened herself up to wider knowledge, as we shall see below.

Even though the mother did not know the importance of schooling, she was influential in the little schooling Hilda received (four grades, more than any of her sisters). Literally as in Walker's poem, Zsuzsa "starched ironed shirts" so that Hilda could get to know what Zsuzsa herself did not know:

The good students and well-off kids were frequently envying me for my abilities at study. But I was the only one with any reason for envy because they had beautiful dark blue skirts, white shirts with pretty long sleeves. But this did not bother me the least bit. I was happy with the dress my mother sewed for me out of one of my sisters' old dresses. She starched it, and I was beautiful and neat. In the writing class, the teacher held my hand and led it along the page. I was so happy, I almost fell out of the chair. (90)<sup>37</sup>

Hilda was a good student and received excellent grades. Her mother went to the exams, and Hilda recited a poem taught to her by the teacher (100). But, her interest in school

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<sup>36</sup> "A lányoknak egyáltalán nem volt fontos az iskola, csak főzni, mosni, takarítani. De erre is megtanította az anyám őket, hogy jól tudjanak férjhez menni. Ezért aztán minden testvérem annyit járt iskolába, hogy írni-olvasni megtanultak. Két-három osztálynál többet nem jártak. Akkor én még nem voltam iskoláskorú, de nagyon szerettem a könyveket, és csodálkoztam, hogy a testvéreim miért nem szeretik a könyveket. Boldogan lapozgattam, gyönyörködtem a képekben, és csodálkoztam. Arra gondoltam, bár már én is járhatnék iskolába. Én majd jó tanuló leszek, és sokat fogok olvasni. Az én világom nagyon kicsi volt, én csak a házon belül tudtam gondolkozni. No meg a Mátyás térben. Anyám legtöbbet ide hozott ki bennünket" (45).

<sup>37</sup> "A jó tanulók és a jómódú gyerekek sokszor irigykedtek rám, hogy én is tudok tanulni. Én sokkal irigyebb lehettem volna, mert nekik szép sötétkék rakott szoknyájuk volt, fehér blúzuk, klottanyagból tucni volt a karjukra húzva. Engem azonban ez egyáltalán nem érdekelt, meg voltam elégedve azzal, amit anyám varrt nekem valamelyik testvérem elnyűtt ruhájából, kikeményítve adta rám nagyon szép, ápolt voltam. Írásórán a tanítónéni mellém ült, vezette a kezemet. A boldogságtól majd kiszédültem a padból" (90).

ebbed because of racial incidents, by their constant moves, and by their tradition. While her mother does not insist on her going to school, the conversation that ensues when Hilda drops out of school is an example of how influential the mother was in forming Hilda's thoughtful, self-conscious personality. Thus, while formal education was not openly enforced by the mother, she consciously made Hilda "more human," another step towards the self-conscious artist she became:

I had plenty of time, as I said final good-bye to school. My mother enrolled me in the school in Dohány Street, but I never set foot inside the building. To this day, I do not know where it is. I just didn't feel like going there. I did not feel like walking over to Dohány Street every morning, and I was worried about getting another bad teacher. I'd prefer not to go, and I told this to my mother. She did not make a big deal out of it, she was rather encouraging. 'You are right, child, school is not for women. Learn how to cook, bake, wash, iron, and clean. When you'll have kids, and you cook and bake, and keep your home clean, your husband will love you. ... I appreciated my mother and looked up to her when she talked to me like that. Whatever problems we had, she knew how to answer. She never talked beside the point, she did not want to slant the truth. In her simple, clean, honest thinking, she tried to lead us to a more human way of living. (158-159)<sup>38</sup>

The important thing is not what the mother says about school, but the way she talks to her daughter and her attitude toward life. Thus, she does not know that her daughter should get an education, but without knowing it, she still makes it possible for Hilda to develop into a clear-thinking person, who will later be able to formulate personal and racial issues in her narrative of life. While Zsuzsa's words seem to reinforce the received notions of a woman's role as an uneducated homemaker, her unusual openness and honesty towards

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<sup>38</sup> "Idóm volt bőven, az iskolától véglegesen elköszöntem, pedig anyám beíratott a Dohány utcai iskolába. Én ebbe az iskolába eyszer sem raktam be a lábam, még a mai napig sem tudom, hol van. A bizonyítványom is ott van még mindig a mai napig. Nem volt kedvem A Dohány utcába baktatni minden reggel, meg féltem, hogy megint valami rossz tanítóm lesz. Gondoltam, hisz itt se fogunk sokáig lakni, akkor megint egy másik iskola, másik tanító. Inkább nem megyek, s ezt meg is mondtam anyámnak. Ő ebből nem csinált gondot magának, inkább helyeselte, 'Igazad van, gyerekem, egy nőnek nem is ez a dolga, tanulj meg főzni, sütni, mosni, vasalni, takarítani. Majd ha lesznek gyerekeid, sütöl, főzöl, tisztán tartod a kis otthonod, akkor az urad is szeretni fog. ... Anyámat nagyon becsültem, és felnéztem rá, amikor így elbeszélgetett velem. Bármilyen problémánk volt, arra mindig értelmesen tudott válaszolni. Nem köntörfalazott, nem hímezett-hámozott, nem akarta elferdíteni a valóságot. A maga egyszerű, tiszta, becsületes gondolkodásával próbált minket terelgetni egy emberibb útra" (158-159).

her daughter encouraged Hilda's personality to develop in a way that went beyond the mother's own simple life.

Moreover, Péliné mentions several times that Hilda was different from her siblings because of her inclination towards reading, art, and knowledge. Just like Wright, she associates reading with unusual emotional reactions: "The books were something totally different for me [than movies]. They elicited emotions from me, they were only mine, I could take them with me everywhere" (183).<sup>39</sup> Hilda's love of books is so emphatic, that even the mother has to change her position on education. The following passage said by Zsuzsa demonstrates her unusual openness to her daughter's views on life, an openness that encouraged Hilda's artistic development but also influenced the mother herself:

My dear daughter, you are a very strange little girl. I don't know who you take after with all your artistic tendencies and composite personality. I understand that you dance and sing, that's quite normal for Roma, but the way you do it is quite extraordinary. I am surprised at your reading so much, you spend all your time reading. I am truly sorry now for having been such a stupid and weak mother, so as to allow you not to go to school. You could have made something out of yourself. This is what happens if a mother loves her child too much. I am so sorry that those malevolent gadjos always called you Gypsy girl, and you used to come home crying. It was particularly that cunt, Sári, your teacher that really screwed us, let her go to hell. If she had been just a little just, you would be in upper grades by now. How proud [using a Gypsy word] I would have been now. But it's okay, now. We shouldn't cry over something we cannot now change. I am proud of you anyway. (186)<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> "A könyv egészen mást jelentett. Érzelmeket váltott ki belőlem, és csak az enyém volt, mindenhová vihettem magammal" (183).

<sup>40</sup> "Drága gyermekem, te egy nagyon fura kislány vagy, nem tudom, kire ütöttél, hogy ilyen művészi adottságad vannak, nagyon sokoldalú vagy. Énekelsz, táncolsz, ezt még megértem, romáknál ez természetes, de az is igaz, hogy ahogy te csinálod, az nem mindennapi. Ezt a sok olvasást is furcsállom, mindenidődöt erre fordítod. Most sajnálom csak, hogy olyan hülye, gyenge anya voltam, és megengedtem, hogy ne járj iskolába. Még sokra vhetted volna. Ez a baj, ha egy anya szereti a gyerekeit, sajnállak, drága gyerekem, hogy azok a rosszindulatú kis gádzsók cigányoztak, és mindig sírva jöttél haza. Főképpen az a nagy mindzsájú Sári tanítód kúrt ki velünk, hogy bolonduljon meg. Ha csak egy kicsit is igazságos lett volna, már polgáriba járhatnál. Milyen gizda is lettem volna. Most már mindegy. Kár azért siránkozni, amit már nem lehet a helyére tenni, azért kár. Így is büszke vagyok rád" (186).

At another time, when Hilda explains how her readings help her discuss race issues with her Jewish girlfriend, the mother reacts, "You are right there, daughter. I did not even think of that, and I scold you so much for reading too much. Now, listen children. I am thinking about right now how we could buy nice and dark furniture for the bedroom" (177).<sup>41</sup> So, we can see here that the mother does not understand what all the reading is all about. Yet, she is open-minded and allows for Hilda's arguments about the positive effects of reading. She herself is spurred by Hilda's developing views, and she expresses her desire for creative action in the best way she can: by buying new furniture for the house.

Hilda never became an accomplished artist (at least, not until her old age) or an educated woman. Nevertheless, her inspirations and inclinations for something "more" than the usual expectations for Roma girls' lives at her time were met when she married a gadjo. This created the possibility for her to write an autobiography in her old age, to take a look at her life and upbringing that is both authentically close and objectively distant from her childhood world of Gypsies. Her mother made this marriage possible, too, thus indirectly shaping Hilda's special position.

The pride the mother took in her home influenced the family's social life and Hilda's open-mindedness. Hilda describes their homes as places where people used to come all the time; there were always guests in their houses. Given their economic constraints, it required a great amount of creativity by the mother to entertain both gadjo and Roma guests. Activities such as preparing delicious food out of meager ingredients, arranging small apartments to accommodate many people, and telling stories to guests

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<sup>41</sup> "Ebben igazad van gyerekem, én erre nem is gondoltam, pedig mennyit veszekszem veled az olvasás miatt. Na, most figyeljete, gyerekeim. Most megint azon töröm a fejem, hogy kéne venni egy szép sötét hálósobabútort" (177).

were all creative actions of the mother that inspired and increased creativity in the daughter. Péliné describes her mother's hospitality by stating that the neighbors "spent more time in our apartment than in their own" (265).<sup>42</sup> The mother was able to create an environment in the Roma apartment that was attractive to gadjos as well. They "liked to sit around in our apartment. My mother could always offer them some food, if nothing else, some toast with tea. She always offered them coffee, too. There was always a pot full of coffee on the cupboard" (265).<sup>43</sup> But the mother's artistic inclination is made even more obvious by the fact that it was her way of talking that people came to hear: "Gadjo neighbors liked the way my mother talked" (271)<sup>44</sup>. Péliné emphasizes that even in the multiethnic environment she portrays, such friendliness among gadjos and Roma was unusual, and it was primarily a result of the mother's openness and interesting personality.

Like the art of Alice Walker's mother, Hilda's mother's creativity was also closely linked to their everyday economic realities. They used to sub-let their rented apartments because of financial necessity. Describing the inconvenience the family endured from a family of four that came to live with them, Péliné states, "But my mother had to do it; otherwise, we would not have been able to pay the rent" (85).<sup>45</sup> A little later, however, the mother made their apartment available for free to a homeless family of gadjos. Besides generosity, this action attests to her creativity in making the most out of a small apartment as well as to her openness in living together with gadjos:

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<sup>42</sup> "Már többet voltak nálunk, mint a saját lakásukban" (265).

<sup>43</sup> "szívesen ücsörögtek a gádzsik nálunk, meg anyám mindig tudott valami halózást rögtönözni, ha mást nem, akkor piritós zsíros kenyeret teával delázott a vendégeknek. Kávával mindig meg tudta kínálni őket. A rendli tetején mindig ott volt a kávé a fazékban" (265).

<sup>44</sup> "A gádzsó szomszédok meg helyeselték, ahogy anyám vakert" (271).

<sup>45</sup> "Anyám rá volt kényszerülve, nem tudtuk volna fizetni a lakbért" (85).

There was a great change in our lives. Once again, of course, it was my mother. It was November and very cold. A family was evicted, and they were living in the entrance way of the apartment house. They were cold as hell. My mother came home, crying, 'Poor Gadjos, they'll freeze to death, what will happen to them? ... No, you won't tell me what to do.' She started rearranging the furniture in the kitchen. 'We can put their bed right here, and I will let their girl sleep on the floor.' ... The truth is, we got to like them very much. ... The few days turned into a full year. (119)<sup>46</sup>

Thus, the friendly relationship with the gadjos, emphasized as being unusual, is made possible by the mother's clever, creative, and generous ways.

This friendly openness to gadjos, however, did not annul the separation and racial taboos embedded in the Gypsies', including Zsuzsa's, consciousness. The mother warned Hilda when her relationship with her gadjo boyfriend started to get serious: "Do not believe in any gadjo" (316).<sup>47</sup> And Hilda knew the general attitude expected of her: "I did not dare to make acquaintances with Hungarian boys, I knew it would be opposed by my family's wishes. My mother believed that no Hungarian man would ever accept a Roma or understand Roma life, just like no Gypsy will ever understand gadjo life" (307).<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, in spite of this general view held by the mother, she was influential in helping Hilda in her acquaintance and love affair with Dodó, her Hungarian friend who was to become her husband. Their first date led to the cemetery, to Dodó's mother's grave, to which Hilda acquiesced because "We used to go to the cemetery a lot with my

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<sup>46</sup> "Életünkben megint változás történt. Persze megint anyám kezdte. Novemberi nagy hideg volt. Kilakoltattak egy családot, és a kapu alatt laktak, majd megvette őket az isten hidege. Anyám sírva jött be: Csóró gádzsók megfagynak, mi lesz velük? ... Nem fogjátok nekem ti kiszabni, hogy mit csináljak. Azzal már kezdte tologatni a konyhabútort. – Ide elfér szegényeknek a vaságyuk, a lányuknak meg megágyazok a földre ... Az igaz, hogy nagyon megszerettük őket. ... A pár napból egy év lett" (119).

<sup>47</sup> "ne higgyél egy gádzsóba se" (316).

<sup>48</sup> "Magyar fiúkkal nem mertem megismerkedni, tudtam, hogy családomból nagy ellenkezést váltana ki. Anyám szerint sose fog egy magyar ember elfogadni, és nem fogja megérteni a roma életet, ahogy a cigány se a gádzsó életet" (307).

mother, too" (330).<sup>49</sup> More importantly, it was Zsuzsa's customary hospitality and friendliness that allowed Dodó's frequent visits to the family:

I was surprised at how well my mother talked with this Hungarian man. Why, when she has always said that she would chase away any gadjos from her daughters? Why doesn't she do so now? Why is she trying to convince Józsi [Dodó] to marry a Hungarian girl [...]? Everybody should stay with his kind, that is the best thing to do. Marriage is for life, not just for a day. That is why this needs to be thought through. (355)<sup>50</sup>

At the stage of this passage, Zsuzsa still opposed the marriage between Hilda and Dodó, but her sober attitude was unusual among the emotional vicissitudes displayed by other members of the family. As things progressed, the mother was very careful that Hilda act in a civil way with Dodó and defended him against Hilda's impolite behavior. When Hilda seemed to have broken up with Dodó, the mother extended her friendship to him, as she had done with others: "Don't you worry about her. If you are around, you are welcome in our family. As you can see, there are many young people that like to stop by here, you can fit in, you will feel well" (371).<sup>51</sup> In this way, it was the mother who "led me to realize my feelings" (390)<sup>52</sup> towards Dodó. Eventually, the mother was able to change her opinion about the accepted views on inter-racial marriage: "Well, my child, thank God, the man is not a villain. That is the most important for me. Now, I close him to my heart, and I consider him my son" (394).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> "Anyámmal mi is nagyon sokat jártunk a temetőbe" (330).

<sup>50</sup> "Anyámon csodálkoztam a legjobban, hogy milyen jól elbeszélget ezzel a magyar emberrel. Vajon miért, mikor mindig azt mondta, hogy sodrófával veri ki. Akkor most miért nem teszi, miért akarja mindenáron meggyőzni a Józsit, hogy magyar lányt vegyen el feleségül, mert csak az való hozzá? Mindenki maradjon a fajtájánál, az a legegészségesebb, mert a házasság egy életre szól, nem egy napra. Épp ezért jól meg kell gondolni" (355).

<sup>51</sup> "Maga meg rá se rántson, azért ha van ideje meg éppen erre jár, nyugodtan feljöhet, szívesen látjuk. Amint látja, jár ide épp elég fiatal, maga is elfér köztük. Jól fogja magát érezni" (371).

<sup>52</sup> "rávezetett erre a felismerésre" (390).

<sup>53</sup> "No, gyermekem, hála istennek, hogy a csávó nem zsvány! Nekem ez a legfontosabb. Most már bezárom a szívembe, úgy veszem őt, mintha fiam lenn" (394).

Thus, Hilda's mother's creativity and openness led her to change her opinion about Dodó and about inter-racial marriage in general. For Hilda, her marriage meant the "mined fields" and "booby-trapped ditches" that led to her rise out of the constraints of her racial and social position, and eventually culminated in her becoming a writer. For Péliné, it is not the writing of her book or its statements on race that constitute the most serious form of resistance; rather, it is Hilda's marriage to a white man that amounts to resistance in the way Barbara Harlow describes it. Writing about "[t]he tension between the 'sentimental romance,' conventional to the development of the bourgeois novel of Europe, and the historical analysis of the emerging resistance movement and organizations" (Harlow 114), she studies how inter-racial marriage can serve to dismantle rigid class structures: "Whereas Emma's marriage to Mr. Knightly at the end of Jane Austen's novel [*Emma*] served to reconsolidate the aristocratic conclave against the threatened incursions of Gypsies and chicken thieves, Mzi and Ann's exile represents a dismantling of the sectarian structures of race and class within South African society" (Harlow 115). In a similar way, Péliné manages to undermine the segregation inherent in her society by focusing on her relationship with and marriage to a Hungarian man. Moreover, what enables her to occupy a position as both outsider and insider of the segregated Gypsy world she describes is the special role she gives to her mother in the book. The very strong relationship, "sisterhood," between Zsuzsa and Hilda prevails throughout the book, making Hilda a thorough insider in the Gypsy society represented by the mother even while she becomes an outsider by marriage.

## **Boncza's Mother: Culture and Alienation**

The mother of Boncza is a minor character in *Smoky Pictures*; nevertheless, it is striking and important to see how she influenced the her son's artistic development. The mother represents sense and stability in the home, a drive towards a consolidated form of life in the confusing legacy of the past and the dire conditions of the present. It must be stated that "Gypsy Paris," the rural slum where Lakatos grew up just in the wake of World War II and the Gypsy pogroms, was perhaps the most hopeless and confusing of all the settings in the four books. There was the real danger of getting lost among the many uneducated and unaspiring members of Boncza's own community as well as of being destroyed or killed by the majority society. Thus, the legacy of the mother provided a hope against hope and a sense of self-respect and normality. On the one hand, the mother was influential in the formal education Boncza received; on the other hand, the few passages about her attitude to life reveal how Boncza could develop an artistic attitude that was at once an insider's and an outsider's position.

Most importantly, the mother is pivotal in the formal education of Boncza. The education of the boy seems to have become possible by chance, as a result of the unfortunate accident of having been hit by a bullet during a hunting party. As a way of compensation, he is offered a free education at high school (grades five and up). Interestingly, the mother is not even surprised at this unlikely turn of events, and states that she had long been planning an education for her son. In the passage where the deal is decided upon, it is clear that the mother's strength and decisiveness create the possibility for the education of the boy, who himself is not very keen on going to school:

'We have already thought about something like that, Mr. Principal,' she said, moved. 'If it were possible, we'd send him to upper schools. We wouldn't mind

dressing in rags, as long as we could have him educated. But I don't think they'd take a Gypsy boy there' There was a sadness in her voice at these words. 'Let me handle that' Rác [Principal] calmed her, 'as long as he likes to study.' Then there is no problem, I thought, as I didn't like to study. 'I'll make sure he does,' my mother threw a threatening glance at me, as if she knew what I was thinking. I was quite disheartened by these words. (53)<sup>54</sup>

When the time came for Boncza to go to school, the mother made sure that he studied well, and, in spite of her otherwise sparing attitude towards money, she did not spare the money on school: "My mother created a very strict schedule for me. She took out of the drawer the textbook issued to me by the school; this time she did not mind the 70 fillérs<sup>55</sup> it had cost" (59).<sup>56</sup> Just as in Péliné's book it is stated that the general attitude among the Gypsies was that schooling was not important. This is how the principal formulates his experience that education of Gypsy children is often stifled by the parents, for he "hope[s] his parents will not bring shame on him" (73).<sup>57</sup> And, indeed, his father is "both happy and unhappy" (74),<sup>58</sup> in contrast to the mother who "stood firm by the idea of schooling, seeing it as the family's future. Perhaps she did not even have lofty plans, just wanted me to be more educated and smarter than the others" (75).<sup>59</sup> She literally "ironed starched white shirts" in order to make possible his education in an unfriendly environment.

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<sup>54</sup> "Erre már mink is gondoltunk, igazgató úr – mondta megilletődve –, bizony, ha lehetne, elküldenénk felső iskolára, nem bánánk, ha mink rongyokban járnánk is, csak tudnánk taníttatni. De én nem nagyon hiszem, hogy cigánygyereket felvegyenek oda." Az utolsó szavaknál elszomorodott. "Ezt bízza rám," nyugtatta Rác, "csak szeressen tanulni." Akkor semmi hiba, gondoltam, mert én aztán nem szeretek. "Na arról majd én gondoskodom" – nézett rám anyám fenyegetően, mintha kitalálta volna a gondolatomat. A szavak hallatára nagyon elszomorodtam (53).

<sup>55</sup> "fillér" = Hungarian change (coin) at the time.

<sup>56</sup> "Szigorú házirendhez kötött anyám. Elővette a kaszni fiókjából az iskola által használatra kiadott könyvet, most már nem számított, hogy hetven fillérbe kerül" (59).

<sup>57</sup> "csak nehogy a szülők hagyják majd szégyenben" (73).

<sup>58</sup> "boldog is, nem is" (74).

<sup>59</sup> "szilárdan kitarzott az iskola mellett, abban látta a család minden jövőjét. Talán nem is szőtt nagy terveket, csak azt, hogy műveltebb, okosabb legyek, mint a többiek" (75).

The main reason why dropping out of school would have been the norm in the case of Boncza is the same reason why Hilda drops out of school in her book. He, too, was a constant subject of ridicule and racial slurs. It is understandable that he wanted to run away from it all, but the mother stood steadfast: "I frequently went home, crying, threatening my mother with running away. But none of it mattered to her. The only thing I achieved was that she started scrubbing me early in the morning. I had to give up all fighting and loitering" (75).<sup>60</sup> Unlike Hilda's mother, Boncza's mother understands the importance of education even in the face of adversity. When all else fails, she appeals to his pride in his sense of self, in a way similar to what Plant calls the "capitalized Self of spirit and consciousness" (Plant 241). The mother chooses her words to cut deep into the personality of her son, awakening in him a meaning of education that goes beyond the learned facts to the development of a proud and self-respecting personality. In the following passage, Boncza's mother suggests that racial incidents can be countered by a strong self, an attitude that is similar to that of Zora's mother, who "didn't get tickled at all" (188) over the story of the beating of a white man, and to that of Hilda's mother, who encouraged her daughter upon quitting school because of racial slurs: "I am proud of you. The gadjos praise you in this house for your helpfulness, courtesy, and talents" (186).<sup>61</sup>

She laid the clean tablecloth, as usual, on the dirty table ... 'All right, son, I understand you. I know it is not easy to be a Gypsy. So, starting tomorrow, you won't be a Gypsy any more. ... You were a Gypsy only at school, where they used to disdain, ridicule, and mock you. Here at home, you will be different. You will be a coward, an empty-headed fool, whom they tried to get educated in vain. You

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<sup>60</sup> "Sokszor sírva mentem haza, és elbujdosással fenyegettem anyámat, de falra borsó volt minden. Csak azt értem el velem, hogy korán reggel már súrolt. Le kellett mondanom a verekedésről, csavargásról" (75).

<sup>61</sup> "Így is büszke vagyok rád. A gádzsók dicsérik a házban, hogy milyen szolgálatkész, udvarias, tehetséges kislányom vagy" (186).

will be a cheater, who has cheated on his brothers, his parents, his people because he did not want to be a Gypsy.' (99)<sup>62</sup>

Thus, she does not let the race issue stop her son from attending school. She appeals to his sense of self-respect to push him towards fields of knowledge she could never have experienced herself.

But the mother figure in *Lakatos* also resembles Zora's mother in her contradictory attitude towards folk traditions, thus enabling Boncza to occupy the insider/outsider position in his reportage on his people's customs. In a reflective passage, *Lakatos* states the difference between his mother, who believes in planning ahead, and his father, who seems to take things as they come. Obviously, his own education is the best example of his mother's plans; nevertheless, he distances himself from both of his parents' views. In what seems a somewhat hopeless and negative reflection, *Lakatos* assumes a philosophical tone that itself attests to his success in having become educated and distanced from the hopeless lives of his parents:

Human wisdom will never be able to decipher fate's ways ... My mother believes that danger can be avoided and fortune can be grabbed if one only plans ahead. My father says the exact opposite: there is always some way, but never the way you wanted, because you may cross others' paths. You could only be accepted by all if you did nothing at all. These are wise pieces of advice, but I don't see the value in either point of view. My mother has always planned ahead, yet she could not accumulate her fortune; she remained poor. My father sired sixteen children, out of which four of stayed alive, even though he did neither wrong nor good. (331)<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> "A tiszta abrosszal, mint mindig, leterítette a koszos asztalt. ... Jól van, fiam, én megértelek, tudom, hogy nem könnyű cigánynak lenni, de holnaptól kezdve már nem leszel az. ... Csak az iskolában voltál az, ahol megvetettek, gúnyoltak, kinevettek, itthon más leszel, gyáva, bolond, akinek nem fog a feje, hiába szeretnék taníttatni. Csaló, aki becsapta a testvéreit, szüleit, fajtáját, mert ő nem akar cigány lenni" (99).

<sup>63</sup> "Az emberi bölcsesség soha nem fog odáig érni, hogy kiszámíthassa a sors útjait. ... Anyám szerint el lehet kerülni minden veszélyt, vagy meg lehet fogni a szerencsét, ha valaki előre gondolkodik. Apám pontosan az ellenkezőjét mondja: mindig van valahogy, de soha nem úgy, ahogy te akarsz, mert nem biztos, hogy másoknak kedvére teszel. Akkor csinálj jót, ha nem tettél semmit. Bölcs tanácsok ezek, mégsem látom egyiknek sem értelmét. Anyám hiába számolt előre, soha nem tudta megfogni a szerencsét, örökre csóró maradt. Apám tizenhat gyereket összekalapált, négyen maradtunk, szerinte nem tett se jót, se rosszat" (331).

The difference between the mother and the father is that the mother believes in planning and thinking ahead, while the father prefers to survive against all odds. It is clear that in this case, the father's view represents the attitude of other major Gypsy characters in the book, like Rilyándri and Bada, who have no plans but possess great survival tactics. Even though Lakatos at this point does not seem to credit his mother's achievements, the book itself and the career of Lakatos, the artist, testify to the fact that his mother's planning has worked at least in the case of his education. He maintains a distance from both his mother and his father in this passage and others, emphasizing his position as an outsider critic; yet, he also maintains his role as the knowing insider witness.

Nowhere is the mother character's role in defining Lakatos's position as both an insider and an outsider more visible than in the descriptions of Gypsy folk beliefs and superstitions. Unlike Hurston, who makes a point of practicing some of the folk language and traditions herself, Lakatos describes these beliefs while self-consciously maintaining a distance from them. His character, Boncza, assumes a very critical stance, for example, in the following passage about superstitious Gypsy folk beliefs:

Our belief is in nothingness; its roots have strengthened throughout the centuries, and it destroys, kills, spreads, and demands faith and fear. It devours everything, it destroys and recreates our very being, it tortures us with fear, so that we become brave enough to endure the slavery of our own manacles. (121)<sup>64</sup>

In a situation where Lakatos looks at his people's beliefs from the outside, making critical comments on them, the mother occupies a position that serves as a link between himself and the world he describes. In spite of her unusually strong insistence on education and career-planning for her son, she also carries a heritage of beliefs and superstitions that

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<sup>64</sup> "Hisszük a semmit, mert évszázadokon át megcsontosodtak a gyökerei, pusztít, öl, fertőz, hitet, félelmet követel. Felfal mindent, létünket megsemmisíti és újjáteremti, addig kínoz a félelemmel, amíg bátrak leszünk saját bilincseink rabságát elviselni" (121).

Lakatos cannot and does not want to make his own. For example, she puts the broom across the door each night so that her children are not exchanged for other children by unknown spirits. She adheres to the belief that such things do happen. But when she explains this superstitious practice to her son, it becomes obvious that she herself is conscious of the contradiction within herself: "She talked about it with shame in her voice, but still, she could not be shaken in her belief" (121).<sup>65</sup> So, she truly believes in the superstitious act, but she is also aware of a sense of inconsistency in her behavior. In another passage, the mother is the only person in the ghetto who does not attach superstitious fear to a goat that has been scaring people by an acquired habit of scratching the house-tops in the middle of the night. While others are making complaints about this "ghost's" visits, the mother exhibits the kind of strength and practicality that Alice Walker writes about: "It had almost knocked me over before ... but I chased it away a couple of times already" (59).<sup>66</sup>

Unlike Péliné, Lakatos became a famous and educated artist early in his life, and his way of becoming a "gentleman" is portrayed in the last section of the book. In an ironic way, however, as he progresses in his education and understanding of mainstream Hungarian society, his ties to his family and community are also strengthened at the approach of World War II, with its Roma persecutions. Thus, while his education and experiences alienate him from his people (he describes himself as being "infinitely sorry" (339)<sup>67</sup> for "belonging to nowhere" (338)<sup>68</sup>), he remains an insider of the Gypsy community through his feelings. The two love affairs in the last section demonstrate this

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<sup>65</sup> "Nagyon szégyellősen beszélt ezekről, de azért a hitében nem lehetett megingatni" (120).

<sup>66</sup> "Engem is majdnem felöklelt ... pedig egy pár este elostoroztam a háztól" (59).

<sup>67</sup> "Végtelen búsulásomban" (339).

<sup>68</sup> "nem tartozom sehová" (338).

point. Boncza develops a romantic relationship with a young Gypsy woman, Bogyó. In an early example of increasing racial tensions, Bogyó's son (from an earlier relationship) is killed in a racial attack at the school he attended (significantly, following the example of his elder, Boncza). The love affair between Boncza and Bogyó arises out of pity but soon develops into a serious relationship. This is an example of how the growing threat on their community bring Boncza closer to his people, arousing not only feelings of pity but also deep emotional involvement. In another love affair, Boncza falls in love with a Hungarian girl. Her positive reactions to him indicate the extent to which Boncza has managed to master the norms of the majority society. But this love affair is portrayed as hopeless in the long run, as inter-racial relationships are not possible in the world he describes. Having gained the girl's love, Boncza proves his ability to enter into mainstream Hungarian society, but eventually rejecting her, he admits to the impossibility of belonging to both worlds. Thus, Lakatos portrays his increased emotional involvement with both worlds. Because of her own ambivalent relationship to the superstitions of her culture, Boncza's mother alone comes close to even beginning to understand the inner turmoil this means for him. In her succinct way, she expresses his difficulties of belonging to both worlds by telling him, "you are sick" (360).<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> "Beteg vagy" (360).

## **Chapter 2. "Unhomely Homes:" Multiple Views of Cultures**

The presentations of relationships with the mothers reflect a position of emotional closeness augmented by authorial distance. Throughout my study of these presentations, I have suggested that these relationships stand for the larger relationships of the writers to their own cultures. They describe their backgrounds with the attachment of sons and daughters, but also with the extra knowledge of educated and distanced outsiders. Studying the way the homes are presented in these narratives, I can more clearly show this special position towards the cultures being described. In all four narratives, there are unusual narrative strategies that set them apart from conventional chronological autobiographies. The changes in narrative positions create multiple subject positions, that in turn allow multiple views of the cultures and backgrounds being described. I will use Whitsitt's term of "framing" to call attention to situations when a narrative shift distances the author from the events being described. This distance, Whitsitt argues, creates an aura of objectivity on the narrator's part, but by the same token, it can also serve to both hide and show emotional involvement and personal investment (Whitsitt 451-2). Thus, a study of the unusual narratives strategies supports a reading of these books as autoethnographies, a genre in which, as I have mentioned in the Introduction, "emotions are not adversary to understanding and objectivity" (Ellis 39).

Hurston and Wright are opposites in the sense that while Hurston portrays her hometown and Southern folk traditions in order to celebrate cultural values, Wright repudiates the South altogether, seeing no values to be salvaged from there. But this opposite point of view hides the fact that they both report on the South, their home, and in order to do that, they both take a similar step: they both step away from the south in

order to be able to see it in its wholeness and report on it. They both step back but remain insiders, witnesses of both overall understanding and inside knowledge. In comparing Péliné with Lakatos, there is a somewhat similar celebration of her home by Péliné as opposed to the stark realities presented by Lakatos. But here again, both authors invoke unusual narrative strategies to show both emotional attachment and objective understanding. In this way, the reader of each of the four narratives gets a multifaceted image of the minority cultures presented. This is certainly not to say that these cultures are described in their totalities; on the contrary, they are approached from several sides by all four authors, allowing for multiple possible interpretations of minority experiences.

### **Homes in Hurston: Various Ways of Looking at the South**

Zora Neale Hurston describes a home in *Dust Tracks on a Road* that is warm, wealthy, and peaceful. Unlike in Alice Walker's descriptions of her mother's garden, the flowers and plants in Zora's parents' house represented not only artistic beauty but also the wealth and stability of an important family in the "Negro town" (1), Eatonville. Hurston describes this combination of wealth and beauty as follows: "There were plenty of orange, grapefruit, tangerine, guavas and other fruits in our yard. We had a five acre garden with things to eat growing in it, and so we were never hungry ... Our house had eight rooms, and we called it a two-story house" (12). From this comfortable home, Zora absorbed the "frontiers" (33) life of the Eatonville community, most particularly the tale-telling men on the porch, "the most interesting place that I could think of" (46), that later in her life became a subject of her research. And from the safety of her home and hometown, she "used to take a seat on top of the gate post and watch the world go by"

(33). In the second part of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Zora wanders around in search of work and education, and here she must have experienced the realities of the South even if she did not do so in sheltered Eatonville. As she notes, "Jacksonville made me know that I was a little colored girl" (70). After her mother's death, she has come to experience both poverty, "that smells like death" (87), and racial attitudes, like from an employer who said: "All I need is a young, full-of-feelings girl to sleep with and enjoy life. I always did keep me a colored girl ... I want a colored girl and I'm giving you the preference" (96). But in spite of the difficulties experienced in the South beyond Eatonville's boundaries, she writes that she was "a Southerner, and had the map of Dixie on [her] tongue" (104). Annette Trefzer describes this self-conscious choice of the South as her home as follows:

Hurston's production of 'Southernness' then is not a simple choice of one identity over another, but it marks the 'interstitial intimacy' (Homi Bhabha's term) of sharply defined cultural spaces -- such as actor/spectator, private/public, North/South, black/white, home and exile. (Trefzer, "Let Us All Be" 75)

Critics have noted and tried to explain in various ways Hurston's comfortable and peaceful home that was set in the same Jim Crow South which sent Richard Wright in search of an escape. Pam Bordelon misses the criticism of the South: "She does not disclose in *Dust Tracks* how she felt the bitter divide of segregation, of having to share 'separate but equal' accommodations" (Bordelon 20). Her conclusion is that Zora made a political choice of not being overly critical:

During the segregated, pre-Civil-Rights era, black writers filtered their racial commentary carefully. Hurston remained in 'her place,' and as a result, her authority and voice were compromised. ... [B]urdened by these realities, Hurston told her largely white audience what she knew it wanted to hear. (Bordelon 21)

This idea that Hurston self-consciously altered the image of her home for political or economic considerations was so widespread that even Maya Angelou asks in her Introduction to the book, "Why did Hurston write *Dust Tracks on a Road*? Whose song

was she singing?" (x). By contrast, the idea that Hurston self-consciously decided to create a more positive image of her world than it really was in order to please certain audiences is dismissed by Steve Sailer on purely logical grounds:

Did Miss Hurston eschew racial militance out of greed? Well, Richard Wright made far more money by smiting the white man hip and thigh. Or was she naïve? It is widely assumed that black militants are more disillusioned with whites than are conservatives like Miss Hurston or Thomas Sowell. (Sailer 60)

Other critics have noted that a home can be a home in spite of its imperfections. Trefzer states: "the segregated South was always an 'unhomely home'" (Trefzer, "Floating Homes" 68). Trefzer also uses Sigmund Freud's term, "uncanny" to refer to Zora's home and her self-identity developed in that home. She also uses the terms "floating home" and "floating self." Each of these expressions refers to the noticeable fact that Zora likes and defends her home in spite of the fact

that being at home in the South means to realize that the safety of home is an illusion, that within the protected boundaries of home there is poverty, violence, and even terror ... that the Southern home – or any home – is never a matter of choosing safety over terror, or romance over reality; it is always both. (Trefzer, "Floating Homes" 74)

That Hurston was painfully aware of both "romance and reality" and "safety and terror," along with their painful consequences can best be seen by a study of the frames she employs in her narrative. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese uses the term "exiles" with reference to women writing about their cultures: "[b]ut when they have written of that culture, they inescapably have written as exiles. Their very writing betokens the chasm that separates them from folk culture as oral culture" (Fox-Genovese 225). Writing about other authors, Monty Williams describes this self-consciousness as follows: "This quest for identity, for a home, for origins, is Romantic. ... But [a] self-conscious knowledge that such a quest is doomed is what converts Romanticism to postmodernism" (Williams

3). Hurston has made a home out of the South that was far from being an ideal home for a black woman. While her Eatonville home was undoubtedly much better than either Walker's childhood home or Wright's many homes, Hurston's overall experience of living in the South must have borne similar marks of pain. Her overall positive descriptions thus can be seen, using Walker's terms, as the "flowers" of her creativity that she self-consciously affirmed in spite of living in the "shabby" South. Her attention to language games, laughter, funny happenings, and daydreams is Hurston's own way of acknowledging the doomed nature of a quest for a perfect home, fixed identity, or romantic origins. These celebrations of creativity do not overwrite the stark reality of pain and homelessness as experienced in the South. In what follows, I will look behind the positive descriptions to reveal Zora's personal and emotional involvement in living in a homeless way in her Southern home, thus being able to report on her minority culture from several, sometimes even conflicting, points of view.

*Dust Tracks on a Road* has an unusual narrative structure. The book can be divided into three parts that Judith Robey characterizes as the "myth, the picaresque, and the essay" (Robey 669). The first section describes the "idyllic" childhood at Eatonville, the second part is about Zora's wanderings in search of jobs and education, while the third part is mostly in essay format, summarizing certain themes and ideas from the author's life. In terms of homes, we can notice that the idealized and idyllic home of Eatonville in the first part and the safety of her mature essay-writing position in the third section seem to serve as a frame around the middle of the book, the chapters that reveal the most about poverty, homelessness, and uncertainty. Using Whitsitt's understanding of framings in "Everyday Use," I will show how Zora presents the South between "carefully lined up

frames" (Whitsitt 449), hiding her emotional involvement in Jim Crow South behind "picaresque" descriptions in the middle section, but also revealing what is at stake for her by carefully framing her narrative.

Writing her autobiography, Zora Neale Hurston, the famous ethnographer, creates a wonderful framing in her book that clearly delimits her own place in a story about black life in the South. Just like Dee and Mama in Walker's "Everyday Use," Hurston carefully balances closeness and distance. She hides her emotions like Dee does, stepping out of the picture of the South, first into the safety of Eatonville, then into the safety of scientific essays. Thus, her book is indeed similar to her ethnographic writings—for example, *Mules and Men*, in that she objectively and with empowerment describes Southern life and folk life, without what she considered the distorting glasses of the "sobbing school of Negrohood" (Hurston, *I Love Myself* 153). Domina expresses this similarity between Hurston's ethnographic writing and autobiography as follows: "In the autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston also blends folklore into her personal historical account. Both books, therefore, narrate not only the life of one black woman writer, but also that of the community and the race she belongs to" (Domina 197). Nevertheless, the idea that Hurston purposefully altered her experiences to produce a happy book is undermined by the emotions and pains she describes, sometimes openly, at other times, in hidden ways. As Sailer explains, "[s]tereotyping her by skin color and sex, the diversicrats ignore much of the inner Zora Neale Hurston" (Sailer 58). I will look for the "inner Zora Neale Hurston," as she is revealed in the passages that frame the descriptions of the South in the middle section. Her personal involvement can be traced by the very fact that she presents images of the South as in a frame, seemingly not hurt, but in reality displaying her lack of

"capacity to risk" (Whitsitt 452). Looking carefully at the scenes just prior to and after the middle section of her autobiography, it seems that Hurston lets us glimpse at the depth to which she is involved in the framed story she describes. The "South," the dangerous Jim Crow South, is thus framed between the two "safety zones" of her Eatonville home and her adult life. From these vantage points, she can describe the South with the calmness of an outsider. However, the transition scenes show just how deeply she is personally involved.

The first section of the book, the story of the happy family home in Eatonville, is closed by scenes in which Zora distances herself from her parents, somewhat similarly to what Fabre calls Wright's "slay[ing of] his father symbolically" (Fabre 78). Hurston's mother dies in Chapter 6, as we have seen, causing understandable and true emotional turmoil for the twelve-year-old Zora. Given the magnitude of the pain, Hurston seems to close this section rather abruptly, stating, "I accepted my bereavement." This terse sentence seems to be a rather surprising conclusion to a passage of deep emotional involvement and pain of mourning. After her mother's death, Zora is sent to attend a boarding school in the nearby city of Jacksonville. A few pages after the description of the mother's death, Hurston closes the chapter by relating an incident in which she imagines that a woman she sees on a porch in Jacksonville is her mother:

I saw a woman sitting on a porch who looked at a distance like Mama. Maybe it *was* Mama! Maybe she was not dead at all. They had made some mistake. Mama had gone off to Jacksonville and they thought she was dead. The woman was sitting in a rocking chair just like Mama always did. It must be Mama! But before I came abreast of the porch in my rigid place in line, the woman got up and went inside. I wanted to stop and go in. But I didn't even breathe my hope to anyone. I made up my mind to run away someday and find the house and let Mama know where I was. But before I did, the hope that the woman really was my mother passed. I accepted my bereavement. (71)

The (perhaps just imagined) resemblance of the Jacksonville woman to Zora's deceased mother not only shows the depths of Zora's pain but also points to the fact that from now on Jacksonville, and by extension the entire South of her wanderings, will be for Zora what Eatonville used to be until her mother's death. Sheltered Eatonville gives way to the racially conflicted Jacksonville, with the narrator carefully showing both similarities and differences.

Papa is similarly written out of the story a few pages later, at the beginning of the next chapter. Papa re-marries in a manner that, in the eyes of his children, understandably seems too soon and to the wrong person. Conflicts between step-mother and daughter are quick to come, and within the scope of a few pages in the book, Hurston describes her great fight with the woman. There seems to be no time for crying over the past, even though the sensitive reader might sense deeper feelings in the twelve-year-old girl than what is revealed through the description, "The primeval in me leaped to life. Ha! This was the very corn I wanted to grind. Fight! Not having to put up with what she did to us through Papa!" (76). Be Zora's feelings what they may, the results of the terrible new wife and the children's hostility toward her seems to have been catastrophic for the father. The respected reverend, who used to be called "Big Nigger" by his children, soon becomes a tired old man. "Papa's shoulders began to get tired. He didn't rear back and strut like he used to" (85). Writing her father thus out of the way, Zora begins her wanderings, what she calls her pilgrimage, through the South. She thus leaves behind her Eatonville childhood and begins the picaresque section by writing, "I must go the way" (86).

The memory of the mother and the painful relationship with the father are indeed not mentioned for a long time, until the end of the picaresque section, the beginning of the essay section. There, Hurston allows herself some sentences of reminiscence and involvement with family:

While in the field, I drove to Memphis, Tennessee, and had a beautiful reconciliation with Bob, my oldest brother ... My father had been killed in an automobile accident during my first year at Morgan, and Bob talked to me about his last days. In reality, my father was the baby of the family. With my mother gone and nobody to guide him, life had not hurt him, but it had turned him loose to hurt himself. ... [other sentences about her family]

I drove back to New Orleans to my work in a glowing aura. I felt the warm embrace of kin and kind for the first time since the night after my mother's funeral, when we had huddled about the organ all sodden and bewildered, with the walls of our home suddenly blown down. On September 18, that house had been a hovering home. September 19, it had turned into a bleak place of desolation with unknown dangers creeping upon us from unseen quarters that made of us a whimpering huddle, though then we could not see why. But now, that was all over. We could touch each other in the spirit if not in the flesh. (142)

But once again, Hurston does not dwell on these issues for long, and contrasts the emotional content with the impersonal, scientific words opening chapter 10: "Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein" (143).

Hurston's unique narrative strategy in her autobiography thus does not simply involve the three different types of narration described by Robey, but also a careful rationing out of her personal and emotional involvement to strategically located "frames" in her narrative. Like many other critics, Patrick Brock misses the sentimental issues in the book: "As we progress on Hurston's autobiography, is clear that something is being withheld and factuality is sacrificed for the sake of aesthetic. While it is obvious that sentimental issues are important in a person's history, this inner life is partly denied in *Dust Tracks*" (Brock 2). I would like to emphasize that this inner life is indeed only

*partly* denied, as it is mainly relegated to a few passages at the beginning and the end of the middle, picaresque, section. While she describes her emotions at some other places as well, it is in these passages that the reader can truly feel the depths of the pain that accompanied parts of Zora's personal life. But allowing us a quick glimpse into these depths, she immediately contains the descriptions of pain by "accepting her bereavement" and going on to "formalized curiosity." In this way, Hurston attests to her personal involvement in the narrative, her insider's point of view, while at the same time claiming the objectivity of one who is not broken, but exhibits "racial health" (Walker, *In Search of 85*).

Hurston's ability to occupy multiple subject positions with respect to her culture and her own life in it can be seen through her clever ways of not denying but separating out events of deep personal involvement from descriptions of ethnographic distance. David T. Humphries describes her return home after long years of schooling as a mixture of scientific work and personal vindication:

Hurston, who had left the home of her father and stepmother on bad terms as a teenager with few resources and even fewer prospects, seems to have viewed her own assignment in part as an opportunity for vindication, a chance to show that she had not only made it, but made it in the white world where she had almost no one to fall back on but herself. (Humphries 71)

Thus, Humphries believes that her ethnographic work in Eatonville must have been infused by personal involvement, an assumption that seems only reasonable. For this reason, Hurston's strategy of relegating issues of family to the few turning points in her book seems a marvelous way of admitting her personal involvement while demonstrating an ability to put it aside. In a similar way, her descriptions of life in Jim Crow South seem to be more accurate than most critics are willing to admit exactly because she does not altogether deny, only compartmentalizes her personal involvement. After the scene of

fighting with her step-mother, she clearly articulates this contradiction: "My vagrancy had begun in reality. I knew that. ... it had happiness in it for me. ... Its agony was equally certain" (85-86). This is the way the picaresque chapters begin, in which the apparent balance of good and bad experiences has been suspect for so many critics. But a careful reading of these framing sections of emotional involvement prove that Hurston does not necessarily try to achieve a balance, but rather manages to invoke a play of distance and closeness in her reportage of her life in Jim Crow South.

As Trefzer has argued, the "unhomely" and "floating" home of the South is a home for the equally "floating" self of Zora herself as presented in her autobiography. But the term "floating" here must not be taken as something floating with the currents. Just as Trefzer writes about "racial identity, whether 'biologically' or culturally constructed," that it "clearly emerges as just that: a construction" (Trefzer, "Floating Homes" 71), we can see that the floating or fluid identity of Hurston's self as presented in *Dust Tracks on a Road* is also a careful construction. The multiple views of her self enable her to present multiple views of her culture as well. Sorensen makes this connection between Hurston's personal identities and her presentations of Eatonville, stating that "unable to identify completely with either the normative Anglo Saxon modern subject or the marginalized Haitian, ... Hurston returns to a fictive version of Eatonville" (Sorensen 17). I would like to emphasize that her narrative contains several versions of Eatonville and several versions of the South, not as much to create fictive worlds as to "formalize" her curiosity, "poking and prying" (143) at various ways of presenting a complex and contradictory culture and life-situation. This is why she describes her various, often conflicting, emotional attitudes to her culture and background, but

carefully plans and structures her narrative to show the validity of parallel interpretations. When she describes her "floating self" in terms of opposites—"I love myself when I am laughing ... and then again when I am looking mean and impressive" (Hurstun, *I Love Myself* title page<sup>70</sup>)—she also refers to a similarly loving attitude towards the similarly contradictory "floating home" of her African American culture in the South.

### **Wright's Home: Multiple Views of Homelessness and Rootlessness**

The stark contrast between Richard Wright's and Zora Neale Hurston's portrayals of the South and their places in it has been widely noted. Where Hurston "employs lyricism" (Brock 3) to turn the unhomely South into a home for her equally floating self, Wright "chooses a cinematic naturalism" (Brock 3) to describe unhomeliness and his homelessness in the South. A close study of Wright's portrayal of his home, his parents, and his self in it, nevertheless reveals some new ideas about his presentations of Southern society. While he described himself in a lecture in France by saying, "I am completely free, I have no roots" (Fabre 77), *Black Boy* reveals an emotional attachment to the South that seems to turn into an "allegiance" (Fabre 78). The contrast between his overbearing denial of the South and his emotional involvement in his childhood world does not weaken his criticism of the all-encompassing racial discrimination in the South, but rather strengthens it. A careful attention to the child Richard's emotional sensitivity reveals a more complex self, enriching the "naturalistic" descriptions of the Communist Wright's objectivity.

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<sup>70</sup> "Zora Neale Hurston, in a letter to Carl Van Vechten, December 10, 1934, referring to a series of photographs he had taken of her" (Hurstun, *I Love Myself* title page).

The childhood homes of Richard as described in *Black Boy* are in stark contrast to the safety of Zora's home in Eatonville. Unlike the Hurston family, the Wrights moved around very often, dictated by the economic necessities of the family. The opening scene of Richard's accidental but severely punished act of setting their house on fire reveals his hidden feelings towards their home. This first example already illustrates that he is similar to Alice Walker's Dee, who, according to the mother, was happy when their house accidentally burnt down: "Why don't you do a dance around the ashes? I'd wanted to ask her. She had hated the house that much" (Walker, "Everyday Use" 1224). Just how much Richard had hated their house is quite openly revealed on the opening pages: "In Memphis we lived in a one-story brick tenement. The stone buildings and the concrete pavements looked bleak and hostile to me" (10). And it is significant in what follows that the personality of his father is linked to the description of their home: "It was in this tenement that the personality of my father first came fully into the orbit of my concern" (10).

Like Walker's family, Wright's family was "forced to live in" many "shabby houses" (Walker, *In Search of* 232), but unlike Alice Walker, Richard Wright does not write about any exonerating circumstances similar to Walker's mother's artistic work around her homes. It is very important in *Black Boy* that the descriptions of his family's homes, the portrayal of his family's life, the descriptions of the South at large, and the presentation of Richard's own broken self are all in harmony. This suggests that there is no escape from the racial atmosphere of the South, and the results of oppression have penetrated into the deepest recesses of his family's personal life, and even the personalities of his people. In Saint Helena, they "rented one half of a double corner

house in front of which ran a stagnant ditch carrying sewage. The neighborhood swarmed with rats, cats, dogs, fortune-tellers, cripples, blind men, whores, salesmen, rent collectors, and children" (59). The depth to which the depressing home influenced the nine-year-old Richard is presented here by the boy's peeking over into the next-door apartment, discovering that "something terribly bad" (65) was happening in that working place of prostitutes. In the next flat they rented, racial realities of the South came literally inside their home in the personality of Richard's aunt's lover, who did something for which he had to flee, and "a tall white man with a gleaming star on his chest and a gun on his hip came to the house" (68). Soon after this incident, Wright describes three moves of the family in the scope of just one page of the book, each creepy flat representing a different aspect of the life of the poor in Jacksonville: "Inability to pay rent forced us to move into a house perched atop high logs in a section of the town where flood waters came. My brother and I had great fun running up and down the tall, shaky steps" (84). The great fun they had here does not suggest any sort of true attachment to this home; it rather suggests Richard's oneness with his environment, his shaky self developing in a shaky world. In the next paragraph, their apartment "nearer the center of town" made him acquainted with "Negro men boast[ing] of their sex lives" (84). But the next paragraph sees them move again, this time throwing Richard into the industrial realities of the railways: "Yet again we moved, this time to the outskirts of town, near a wide stretch of railroad tracks to which, each morning before school, I would take a sack and gather coal to heat our frame house, dodging in and out between the huge, black, puffing engines" (84). What we can see in each case is that there is no distinction between the home and its environment, and the bleak realities of Southern life greatly affect the development of

young Richard. Rather than being a refuge and a safe haven in a dangerous world, home for Richard is that world itself. In a violent world, he lives in a violent home. In a poor world, he lives in destitute poverty. In a world of drunkards, he himself becomes a drunkard. This is his way of showing to just what extent the world around him affects even the deepest recesses of his personality. Further, in this way, he himself becomes an example of the world he describes, being able to say, "the gang's life was my life" (78).

However, the negative influences of the homes and environment on Richard are turned into an artistic representation of the deprivation of the South in *Black Boy*. Wright emphasizes the extra knowledge and understanding Richard had of the South by having experienced alienation and destitution to a greater extent than most Southerners, including his family members. Even his uncle is unable to understand the extent of the effects of Richard's situation on his life:

I looked at him and did not answer; there flashed through my mind a quick, running picture of all the squalid hovels in which I had lived and it made me feel more than ever a stranger as I stood before him. How could I have told him that I had learned to curse before I had learned to read? How could I have told him that I had been a drunkard at the age of six? (98)

This experience of having lived through the worst of Southern life is what urges him to go away, ending up in his homelessness. The earliest experience of homelessness in Richard's life is when his mother (after having been abandoned by his father) is forced to put her children into an orphanage for a while. The child's fears are heart-rending: "During the first days my mother came each night to visit me and my brother, then her visits stopped. I began to wonder if she, too, like my father, had disappeared into the unknown" (29). This shocking but understandable fear of the boy is shown to have added meaning for Richard, the black boy, as he realizes that a home simply does not exist for him. His story of being in the orphanage and his attempt to escape from there is a story of

his unusual deprivation. It is here that he first expresses his realization of a homelessness that goes beyond simply not having a good house. During his escape, he describes his confusion as such: "In a confused and vague way I knew that I was doing more running *away* from than running *toward* something" (31).

And it is this realization that the book *Black Boy* is structured around. *Part I: Southern Night* is centered around his dream of escape and closed by the shocking sentence of connecting culture and terror: "This was the culture from which I sprang. This was the terror from which I fled" (257). His desire to escape *from* the South is emphatically an escape from a stifling world rather than an escape *to* somewhere that is known. In *Part II: The Horror and the Glory*, it becomes clear that the North cannot offer him a home either. In spite of the glory of his artistic success, the horror of minority life remains. But Wright also demonstrates that his artistic self has developed out of this homelessness. It is in this context that his above-quoted statement about his own freedom was uttered. As Fabre recounts it: "At the close of a lecture in Paris, he once told a student: 'You see, the difference between the two of us is that I am completely free, I have no roots, whereas you are bound by European history and the tyranny of the place'" (Fabre 77). It seems, therefore, that the adult Wright reached a stage where not having a home seemed to positively influence his ability to understand and describe the South. Richard of *Black Boy* has already experienced that the homelessness of living in the South is part of a greater homelessness that influences the depths of his personal life. No refuge is offered in the form of a peaceful home or a free North; relief from the sufferings of homelessness comes rather in the form of dreams, hopes, and the reality of becoming an artist: "I dreamed of going north and writing books, novels. The North symbolized to

me all that I had not felt and seen; it had no relation whatever to what actually existed. Yet, by imagining a place where everything was possible, I kept hope alive in me" (168).

Wright's artistic representation of the South thus seems to be rooted in a contradiction: on the one hand, he shows the extent to which his personal life was influenced by the oppressive culture from which he "sprang"; on the other hand, he claims his freedom and independence of this "terror," which determined the behavior of his friends but from which he fled. But it is exactly this contradiction that makes his images of the South, its culture, and its people thorough. Coming from the opposite direction than Hurston, Wright nevertheless becomes a writer of the South as much as Hurston does. Without giving up an inch of his denial and criticism of Southern society, Wright manages to structure his narrative in a way that attests to his feelings based on his personal involvement as well as to the objectivity of a distant outsider. While Fabre states that "*Black Boy* makes Wright a writer *out of* the South *not of it*" (Fabre 77), he also claims that "Richard Wright is as much a son of Mississippi as is William Faulkner, yet many of his readers do not think of him as a southern writer" (Fabre 77). Further, he brings up examples of critics who have considered Wright a Southerner:

Arna Bontemps emphasized Wright's southern heritage together with what he considered his lack of humor ... James Baldwin somewhat unexpectedly described Wright as 'a Mississippi pickaninny, mischievous, cunning and tough.' (Fabre 78)

In what follows, I will show that Wright in fact strengthens his total rejection of the South by the inclusion of scenes that speak about his emotional involvement. Adams studies the extent to which Wright attempts "to underplay his own family's middle-class ways and more positive values" (Adams 205), listing omissions such as that "his mother was a successful school teacher," that "many of his friends were children of college

faculty members," "his own sexual experiences," and "reactions from sensitive southern whites" (Adams 205). In spite of these omissions, Adams argues that the book "is an especially truthful account of the black experience in America" (Adams 205). If Wright's message is the extent to which racial oppression enters the personal sphere of a black boy in the South, then one might wonder how that black boy can later describe that South in any truthful way. This is where the notion of framing can be of help in two ways: First, Wright carefully separates "romantic" images of beauty and childhood happiness from the overall "naturalistic" descriptions of Southern life. Second, two passages about his father, one immediately after the other, attest to his ability to quickly change authorial positions. Finally, I will show that his demonstrated ability to render his deep emotional involvement with his father together with the voice of a distanced outsider is at the core of his artistic development (self-definition).

While Brock and others emphasize Wright's naturalism—for example, Brannon Costello writes that it is "naturalism or social realism that we typically associate with Wright" (Costello 39) – the lyricism of *Black Boy* has been noted, for example, by Carolyn Camp. Camp studies the extensive use of blank verse, which she calls the four "poetic catalogues" in the book, and states that

Four primary catalogues are significant in *Black Boy*. Varied in length, style, and implication, they weave throughout the text, reflecting Wright's artistry at creating a substructure and, consequently, suggesting an alternate, metaphorical interpretation of this heretofore assumed negative autobiography. (Camp 30)

Camp sees a "pattern of duality," a contrast, between the positive poetic images of the catalogues and the rest of the book. She calls the second catalogue a "masterpiece of contradiction," as it presents "a childhood of playfully chasing fireflies, fishing with grandpa, picnics, and an endless bounty of fun and food" while in reality, "[w]hat is

actually experienced ... is nothing like the idyllic childhood described" (Camp 34). She sees a "message of hope" in these texts, concluding that "*Black Boy* should be read metaphorically as well as literally in order to fully understand Wright's intent and the book's potential for influencing social change" (Camp 38). Studying the importance of homes, however, reveals an artistic strategy other than simply sprinkling hope into a sea of despair. Shifting four times his negative and naturalistic narrative into positive and poetic passages, Wright demonstrates his ability to distance himself from the stifling experiences of the black boy described on the pages of his autobiography. In an almost analytic manner, he separates the good from the bad, isolating the good and positive parts into a storehouse of lyricism. There is no reason to assume that the boyhood experiences described in such poetic insertions as, "There was the delight in seeing long straight rows of red and green vegetables stretching away in the sun to the bright horizon" (7), are not based on personal experience. In fact, critics skeptical about the truthfulness about the book on the basis of its being too negative can be countered by these demonstrations of childhood innocence and joy.

We can understand the roles of these poetic insertions using Whitsitt's ideas on framing as well. The shift into poetic language in these positive parts distances them from the narrative voice of Richard. He presents these sweet memories as if stepping out of the book that is about the negativity of his childhood. But rather than relegate them to the realm of imagination, we can interpret these few lovely images of the South as photo images taken by "a curious visitor who has momentarily stopped off the road" (Whitsitt 448). Images such as "the crying strings of wild geese winging south against a bleak, autumn sky" (8) and such folk beliefs as "if it rained while the sun was shining, then the

Devil was beating his wife" (72) can be similar to the photo images taken by Dee of her mother's shabby house in "Everyday Use." In that sense Wright frames these positive experiences, making sure they are in the book, but separated from the life of Richard. Following Whitsitt's logic, this may attest to the fact that Richard's emotions about the South and his childhood are also "much more precarious" (Whitsitt 452) than usually assumed. The purpose of *Black Boy* is certainly not to describe the beauties of Southern life. But the poetic catalogues that let the reader glimpse a world that is much more positive than the naturalistic experiences of Richard make this narrative more believable by incorporating – and, through their special presentation, even emphasizing – childhood experiences of innocence and beauty without disturbing the narrative logic of the life of a child whose deepest recesses of being were penetrated by racial oppression and its social consequences. In this way, Richard is revealed as a true insider of the South, while narrating his story with the wisdom of an outsider, too. Moreover, the poetic catalogues can be thought of as the "adornments" on the otherwise terrible homes of Richard, the "flowers" his mother – unlike Walker's mother – did not have.

A close reading of Wright's presentation of his father shows even more succinctly his double stance as a Communist-minded outsider while at the same time an emotionally involved insider. Like Hurston, Wright concentrates his descriptions of his father at the beginning of his book, describing his terrible nature in Chapter 1, and jumping ahead of time at the end of the chapter to describe him as an old man. According to Fabre, this "functions to slay the father symbolically" (Fabre 78). Wright's descriptions of his father are closely linked to his descriptions of the South. The initial description of the father is quite negative:

He worked as a night porter in a Beale Street drugstore and he became important and forbidding to me only when I learned that I could not make noise when he was asleep in the daytime. He was the lawgiver in our family and I never laughed in his presence. ... I stared at him with awe as he gulped his beer from a tin bucket, as he ate long and heavily, sighed, belched, closed his eyes to nod on a stuffed belly. He was quite fat and his bloated stomach always lapped over his belt. He was always a stranger to me, always somehow alien and remote. (10)

But the true extent of the pain and suffering Nathan Wright caused his family comes to light only after he leaves them for another woman. In one of the most heart-rending scenes in the book, Richard goes with his mother to literally beg his father for some money so that the family would not starve. "I ain't got nothing,' my father said laughing" (32), and, on the suggestion of his new woman, gave the child and his mother a nickel.

The mother's parting words and Richard's subsequent feelings speak for themselves:

'You ought to be ashamed,' my mother said, weeping. 'Giving your son a nickel when he's hungry. If there's a God, He'll pay you back.' 'That's all I got,' my father said, laughing again and returning the nickel to his pocket. We left. I had the feeling that I had had to do with something unclean. Many times in the years after that the image of my father and the strange woman, their faces lit by the dancing flames, would surge up in my imagination so vivid and strong that I felt I could reach out and touch it; I would stare at it, feeling that it possessed some vital meaning which always eluded me. (33)

Just as Hurston ended her emotional description of her mother's death with the sudden statement, "I accepted my bereavement," Wright also follows this terrible scene with a sudden change in authorial voice to describe his next and last meeting with his father 25 years later through the eyes of a distant observer:

I was overwhelmed to realize that he could never understand me or the scalding experience that had swept me beyond this life and into an area of living that he could never know. I stood before him, poised, my mind aching as I embraced the simple nakedness of his life ... From the white landowners above him there had not been handed to him a chance to learn the meaning of loyalty, of sentiment, of tradition. Joy was unknown to him as was despair. ... I forgave him and pitied him as my eyes looked past him to the unpainted wooden shack. From far beyond the horizons that bound this bleak plantation there had come to me through my living the knowledge that my father was a black peasant. (34)

In the scope of just one page of narrative, the heartless father driving his family into poverty and hunger becomes a "black peasant" who could not be responsible for his deeds. Wright's description of his father in this concluding scene of Chapter 1 is characterized by Fabre: "What a proud, God-like stance on the part of Wright! He had succeeded where his father had failed" (Fabre 80). This change in the narrator's subject position can be seen as a way to frame the father's character. Richard describes the terrible and painful conduct of his father during his childhood, only to immediately step back and give a "bird's eye view" of the situation, explaining it as an outsider. This does not lessen the emotional turmoil the father must have caused to the child Richard, but it does suggest that the author is free of these effects now: a freedom of homelessness that allows him to see his father in terms of social situation and class struggle. On the other hand, this all-too-sudden passing on from the emotional turmoil described to the "objective" characterization of his situation can also be seen as a way to compartmentalize, to contain and frame his emotions, perhaps because of having too much to lose. The "realm of the authentic, but too close" (Whitsitt 453) of the child's experiences is "moving toward art and representation" (Whitsitt 453) in a way that is not unlike Walker's narrative strategy in "Everyday Use."

Thus, Fabre's observation that Wright symbolically "slays" the father at the end of Chapter 1 must be read in the context of the statement that "many times the years after that the image of my father ... would surge up in my imagination." Clearly, this "slaying," this writing him out of the emotional life of Richard, did not take place as quickly as the narrative arrangement suggests. Rather, it consisted of a deep emotional experience that was to haunt him for years to come, the meaning eluding him, but the

effects present throughout (at least) his young life. Thus, the chapter's concluding explanation, the meaning and understanding he offers, falls short of explaining the true nature of his experience with his father. His personal involvement is at stake. Most importantly, the statement, "I had the feeling that I had had to do with something unclean" suggests a personal involvement in the events, perhaps even a childish guilt for his father's sins, as if Richard had had anything to do with his father's behavior. More than a moral outrage a distant observer might feel, the child experienced the events with a sense of a "vital meaning which always eluded" him, showing the extent to which he was affected and confused.

Wright's personal childhood involvement with his father and his "God-like stance" of social criticism, however, seem to be more closely linked if we consider the other passage in the book where he uses the same words of "dealing with something unclean." In the following passage, we can see that his relation to the South can be seen just as emotionally deep as his relation to his father. In another turning point of his life, Richard is the valedictorian of his graduating class, and as such is chosen to deliver a speech at the commencement ceremony. In what seems a surprise for Richard, the principal hands him a speech he has written. Richard, however insists on writing his own version, at which the principal tries to convince him by offering him a teaching position in the school system: "He was tempting me, baiting me; this was the technique that snared black young minds into supporting the southern way of life" (175). Richard looks at this situation, and generalizes the morals of the story to his entire life in the South:

I was feeling the very thing that the state of Mississippi had spent millions of dollars to make sure that I would never feel; I was becoming aware of the thing that the Jim Crow laws had been drafted and passed to keep out of my consciousness; I was acting on impulses that southern senators in the nation's

capital had striven to keep out of Negro life ... In me was shaping a yearning for a kind of consciousness, a mode of being that the way of life about me had said could not be, must not be, and upon which the penalty of death had been placed. Somewhere in the dead of the southern night my life had switched onto the wrong tack and, without my knowing it, the locomotive of my heart was rushing down a dangerously steep slope, heading for a collision, heedless of the warning red lights that blinked all about me, the sirens and the bells and the screams that filled the air. (169)

A few pages later, still brooding upon this incident, he writes: "I had been talking to a 'bought' man and he had tried to 'buy' me. I felt that I had been dealing with something unclean" (176). As these are the only two instances in the book when he feels having dealt with "something unclean," we can understand the significance of the similarity of his emotional reaction. His experience with the principal, an experience that exemplifies the subservient attitude to the Jim Crow South that Richard hates so much, elicits as deep an emotional involvement as the experience of having been abandoned and let starve by his own father. Wright suggests that he is as involved in the situation of the South as a child is involved in his parents' lives.

Significantly, the conclusion to the graduation story is that he eventually delivered his own speech and afterwards left the ceremony without taking leave of anyone. Leaving right after the speech, without even waiting for the ceremony to finish, suggests another connection to the scene with his father. Just as the emotionally charged story of begging his father in vain is immediately followed by the distance of his scientific observations 25 years later, the emotional turmoil of having to contradict the principal and delivering his own speech is immediately followed by a quick departure and denial of any emotional stake. It seems that Richard "doth protest too much" in stating that he did not care about the consequences of his speech: "I rose and faced the audience and my speech rolled out.... I did not care if they liked it or not; I was through. ... The hell with it!" (178).

These similarities between the scene involving his father and the scene about his graduation speech suggest that he was deeply emotionally involved, experiencing the pains to his very bones, but at the same time, he self-consciously gathered himself to report on the situation with the distance and understanding of an objective outsider.

In conclusion, I can state that Wright, as an author, takes advantage of his homelessness and rootlessness to describe the South in its fulness. Simultaneously reporting on Richard's long-standing desire to escape from the world of his childhood and on the emotional depths to which Southern life has touched him, *Black Boy* offers a reading of the South that emphasizes its complexity. Richard's own homelessness suggests a total rejection of this world; yet, he manages to describe his father, mother, principal, friends, and other Southern characters with both emotional reactions and clear explanations. It is this rift in his soul that enables the presentation of a complex image of growing up in a world of discrimination and hatred. Besides his total alienation, we also get a glimpse of Richard's childhood reactions to the only world he knew, the world he had no choice but to call home. This is perhaps the "unique perspective from which to write about America" that Laura Dubek (593) describes, or "[t]he apparent contradiction between poetic content and recorded events" that Camp (246) notices. The portrayal of a childhood and a home that might seem unrealistically negative to some critics is validated by these shifting authorial positions, offering various ways of describing life in the South.

### **Péliné's Home: Finding Her Self in Multicultural Budapest**

Péliné Nyári Hilda creates a home out of her childhood Budapest in a manner that resembles in many ways Zora Neale Hurston's creation of her home in Eatonville. Taking

Hurston's description of Eatonville—that "Eatonville is what you might call hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick" (3)—Trefzer considers the town as a "signifier in Hurston's narrative that opens a field of 'play' which being neither 'straight' nor 'crooked' resists totalization and homogeneity" (Trefzer, "Let Us All Be" 72). Upon close inspection, we see a similar contradiction in the image of Budapest as described by Péliné, which becomes a "floating signifier ... a 'home' for the equally unstable, fluid identities of" (Trefzer, "Let Us All Be" 72) Hilda. Studying the ways in which Péliné describes her home in Budapest can help in understanding her subject position and the ways in which she describes the "floating selves" of her characters, primarily her mother, suggesting the equally unstable definitions of racial and cultural identities. By creating her home in the otherwise unhomey city, Péliné, in Homi K. Bhabha's words, "evoke[s] and erase[s the] totalizing boundaries" (Bhabha 213) that divided Gypsies from non-Gypsies in most of the country, for example, as described in Lakatos's book. In this way, she "disturb[s] those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (Bhabha 213).

Péliné erases the physical and racial boundaries in her Budapest neighborhood, but she does so by evoking boundaries between the country and the city and between the poor slum and the city. Her city becomes a place of "interstitial intimacy" (Bhabha 19), a home of happy childhood and racial harmony, while she calls attention to the arbitrariness of this image by emphasizing the danger and unfriendliness of all places outside of her familiar milieu. Péliné thus, similarly to what Trefzer writes about Hurston, "transcend[s] the tight boundaries drawn around" (Trefzer, "Floating Homes" 70) Gypsies, but she calls attention to the arbitrariness of this transcending by exaggerating

other boundaries. Like Hurston, Péliné "is constructing an ideological space that represents the struggle with her own self-image as a" (Trefzer, "Floating Homes" 71) Gypsy woman. In the floating home, she thus creates the floating selves of her mother and herself, undermining notions of unified selves that render themselves available to racial stereotypes. Studying Péliné's portrayal of her home in Budapest and the admirable mother character she creates in her book, we can understand more clearly how she, "[s]imultaneously inside and outside of the 'home,' ... occup[ies] both subject and object positions as observer and observed" (Trefzer, "Floating Homes" 74).

Péliné "creates" a home out of the inner city of Budapest where she lived as a child. Similarly to Richard Wright's family, Hilda's family was on the move all the time, also driven from one apartment to the other because of economic considerations. But unlike Wright, Péliné, having no particular home in the city, creates a home out of the city itself. While Wright emphasizes the dangers of the city, including its black and white neighborhoods, Péliné valorizes her section of the city as a home for all sorts of races. In the following passage, for example, she emphasizes that it was on the streets where she really felt at home:

I was the person in the family who spent the least amount of time at home. I went to the movies a lot, and I went walking with my girlfriends to Kálvária Square almost every day. I used to go over to Mrs. Lipárdi's house, where I used to draw and help her out sewing. This way, I made some money to go to the movies, which was the most important thing for me. Besides, I liked sewing. I wasn't a bad girl; I never went very far, just played around close to home. That's how I felt safe. The movie theaters were nearby, too. There was the Józsefváros movie house on Kálvária Square ... [there follows a list of many movie theaters around her home]. (273)<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> "Én voltam a legkevesebbet otthon, rengeteget jártam moziba, szinte mindennap a Kálvária téren a barátnőikkel sétálgattam. Lipárdi néninél rajzolgattam, besegítettem a varrásba, így a heti mozipénzem megkerestem, és ez volt a legfontosabb nékem. Meg szerettem is csinálni. Nem voltam én rossz kislány,

This emphasis on the inner city as a whole functioning her home can be seen in the scene of her return to the city after a brief stay in the countryside. Even though Hilda does not even know where exactly her mother has moved to in the meantime, her return to the city is synonymous with coming home. In this way, she comes home to the city without having a home in it. She loves the church, the streets, the tramways, the shops, even without knowing anything about where their newly rented apartment is. "Then it occurred to me that I did not even know where we would be living at the time. So, I asked my grandmother which street we were heading towards. ... As we walked along Baross Street, I saw the church, shining and beautiful as always" (74).<sup>72</sup>

Similarly to Wright, Hilda had to live in neighborhoods with prostitutes, calling attention to the poverty and destitution rampant in her section of the city. Wright emphasized the terrible nature of this situation, ending in a scene in which the mother, uncharacteristically of herself, takes Richard's side against the landlady's anger, and the family ends up moving "into another frame house on the same street" (65). Richard's mother's moral indignation—"What do you expect children to do when you do *that*?" (64)—is in stark contrast to Hilda's playful inclusion of the prostitutes into her innocent world:

There were two whorehouses in Munkás Street, just next-door to our house in Alsóerdősor Street. We were surrounded by whores, and I now knew what they were doing. Previously, I could not for the life of me understand what it was all about. But by this time, I understood all of it, and as I came to an understanding of what they had to do, I started pitying and loving them. They were so beautiful and

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messzire nem mentem, csak a házunk közelében szerettem játszani. Csak akkor éreztem magam biztonságban. A mozik is jó közel voltak. A Kálvária térnél a Józsefvárosi mozi" (273).

<sup>72</sup> "Most jutott eszembe, hogy vajon most hol is fogunk lakni, meg is kérdeztem öreganyámat, hogy melyik utcába megyünk. ... Hát ahogy megyünk a Baross utcán, már látom, hogy ott ragyog teljes szépségében a templom" (74).

kind. I even made friends with them, as I played a lot of games—for example, hopscotch, on the streets with the other children. (155)<sup>73</sup>

Rather than expressing moral outrage or disgust, Hilda asserts feelings of pity, love, friendship, and playfulness. It must be emphasized that her acceptance of prostitutes is not a sign of general moral permissiveness on part of the author, as elsewhere she emphasizes prudishness in relationships: "Back in those days, young men were patient and well-brought-up. They were happy to be allowed just to pronounce a girl's name. They respected the female sex. But women also deserved that respect" (261).<sup>74</sup> Playing games with or near prostitutes on the streets, rather, empowers Hilda to be what she wants to be even in the midst of a home that may seem unhomely for children. In this way, she resembles what Trefzer writes about Hurston: "Because Hurston's desire for belonging in the South is balanced against the 'unhomeliness' of living there, her autobiography successfully reinvents subjugated southern communities as sites for empowerment" (Trefzer, "Floating Homes" 73).

For Hilda, the city was a place where racial differences between Roma and Hungarians were unknown. Roma music diverted Hungarians, she made friends with Hungarian girls, and overall, it was a friendly place of stores and restaurants:

Back in those days, the smaller streets were full of shops, taverns, restaurants, grocery stores, milk shops, paint stores, butchers, laundrettes, diners, wine cellars, pastry shops, and many artisans' shops. The shopkeepers were all kind and courteous, and their work was always admirable. Most restaurants had Roma music going, so even the passers by could enjoy it. They would stop by and listen to the good music. There were cafés and taverns all around Kálvária Square. I particularly loved one of the cafés, where men were playing billiards in the

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<sup>73</sup> "A Munkás utcában két kupleráj is volt, pont a mi házunk mellett az Alsóerdősor utcában. Körül voltunk véve kupikkal, most már tudtam, hogy mit csinálnak. A szállóban még hiába magyarázták, nem tudtam felfogni és megérteni, hogy mi ez. Itt már meg kellett értenem, és ahogy megértettem, hogy mit kell nekik csinálni, sajnáltam és megszerettem őket. Olyan szépek volta és kedvesek. Össze is barátkoztam velük, mert én is legtöbbit az utcán játszottam a gyerekekkel az ugróiskolát" (155).

<sup>74</sup> "Abban az időben még türelmes, jól nevelt fiatalemberek voltak, még az is öröm volt számukra, ha egy leány nevét kimondhatták. Tiszteletben tartották a női nemet. De a nők is kiérdemelték" (261).

morning, and a hell of a good pianist came in the afternoon and sang wonderfully ... My girlfriends were always Hungarian girls; in some ways, I was better off with them. Our ways of thinking were quite similar. I never had a girlfriend in school, only from among the girls in our house or from the square. I loved the swings on the square, particularly one shaped like a bell. And there was the slide. (134-135)<sup>75</sup>

But the whole world was not like her home in the center of Budapest. She emphasizes the special nature of this (invented) home by going into the extremities in her negative descriptions of anywhere else. For example, the racial harmony she sees in her neighborhood and apartment buildings breaks down in the school, where she has to experience racial prejudice from the outset. She describes three places where she lived outside of central Budapest, each lacking the homely feeling of peace, childhood, and harmony she associates with her home there. The poor but safe home she had in the city is "framed" by three other places: the middle-class neighborhood of Pesterzsébet, the village life at Bajna, and the extreme poverty of the city slum called Augusztai Enclosure.

The first such place is the outskirts of the city, called Pesterzsébet. She characterizes the place as follows: "That dirty, dusty Pesterzsébet. I hated it very much, and I hate it even today. The whole family felt terrible, as we moved from our busy house to this lonely one. It was exasperating" (48).<sup>76</sup> She herself admits that her hatred was somewhat arbitrary: "Although that house wasn't ugly. ... My mother painted it apple-

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<sup>75</sup> "Abban az időben egy mellékutcában egymást érték az üzletek, kocsmák, vendéglők, fűszeres, tejszarnok, festékbolt, hentes, mosoda, kifőzde, borpince, cukrászda és megannyi kisiparos. Ezek mind olyan figyelmesek voltak és udvariasak, és milyen munkát adtak ki a kezükből! Legtöbb vendéglőben szólt a romazene, így a járókelők sem unatkoztak. Meg- megálltak, és hallgatták a jó muzsikát. A Kálvária téren körben voltak kávéházak meg kocsmák. Én itt is szerettem egy kávéházat, mert itt a férfiak biliárdoztak délelőtt, délután meg jött egy kurva jó fej zongorista, és olyan jókat énekelt. ... A barátnőim mindig magyar lányok voltak, valahogy velük jobban elvoltam. Gondolkodásban is sokszor egyforma nézeteink voltak. Az iskolából sose volt barátnőm, csak a házból lakók vagy a téren megismert lányok közül. A téren nagyon szerettem a hintákat. Különösen, ami olyanforma volt, mint a haranghinta. Meg a csúszdát" (134-135).

<sup>76</sup> "Arra a mocskos, poros Pesterzsébetre. Én nagyon utáltam, de még a mai napig is utálok. Az egész család nagyon rosszul érezte magát. Abból a mozgalmas házból, ahol eddig éltünk, egy ilyen magányos házba lakni. Hát ez kétségbeejtő volt!" (48).

green. ... The family felt much more comfortable, with enough room for everybody. My father didn't lie so much in bed, he could go outside and sit in the garden. It was early spring, and the sun shone warmly" (48).<sup>77</sup> She does not dwell long upon this place, but the irrationality of her aversion to living just a few tramway-stops away from the city center in a house with a backyard is striking. This further emphasizes that her home is the central section of the city, called Józsefváros, with its bustling life, multiple ethnicities, and livable poverty, but without a home for the family in the sense of a comfortable or permanent abode.

Another terrible place with which Hilda contrasts her home is her grandmother's village, Bajna. One of the reasons for her bad feelings about having to stay in Bajna for a few months is that her mother is not with them. But this alone does not explain the unredeemable contempt she exhibits for the place throughout, despite the otherwise positive experiences of Gypsy music, extended family, story-telling, and even interracial harmony. Her irrational and negative behavior in Bajna is in stark contrast with Hilda's open and friendly personality exhibited at home. For example, she refuses to help her grandmother sell her merchandise or even to carry the corn received as a payment:

My grandmother took out her merchandise, and the people were buying from her, paying with money or food. And I just stood there and watched the old gadjos, sitting in their dirty loose pants, wearing greasy hats, pipes hanging out of the corners of their mouths, long moustaches hanging down on both sides of the faces that were worn and wrinkled. I was sorry for them and felt afraid of them. (62)<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> "Pedig a ház nem volt csúnya. ... Anyám mindjárt kimeszelte almazöldre. ... Itt kényelmesen elfért a család, apám se feküdt annyit az ágyban, kiült a kertbe. Kora tavasz volt, langyosan sütögetett a napocska" (48).

<sup>78</sup> "Öreganyám már rakta is eléjük, vásároltak is mindig, vagy pénzért, vagy élelemért. Én meg csak álltam, és figyeltem az öreg gádzsókat, hogy ültek a mocskos bő gatyában, zsíros kalapjukban, pipával a szájukban, kétoldalt nagy lifegő bajusszal, barázdás, elgyötört arccal. Sajnáltam is őket, meg féltem is tőlük" (62).

She "argued and cried" (75)<sup>79</sup> a lot during her stay in the village, which earned her the nickname "peasant-girl," an ironic designation for someone whose point was exactly that she belonged to the city, not to the country. Her conclusion is to the point: "I felt great knowing that I didn't live in the village but in the city. At the same time, I felt sorry for my grandmother for having to live the terrible life of villagers, and having to go back to that place (73)."<sup>80</sup>

The third and most developed opposite to her home in central Budapest is the deservedly hated slum, called Augusztá Enclosure. The descriptions of this shanty-town on the outskirts of Budapest, a place her family moved to twice, during times of extreme poverty, are naturalistic and realistic, resembling the style of Wright, rather than Péliné or Hurston:

Finally, we have caught sight of the enclosure, which made us happy, as we could put down our packages. ... The sight before me outdid all my imagination. There was real poverty here. The entire Augusztá reeked of the stench of poverty, and there was smoke everywhere. Oh, and the figures there. The way people looked there was something to see, they were all ragged and shabby. There were plenty of kids, running around with naked asses. The women were doing their laundry in front of the doors, with the ragged clothes hanging on cloth-lines all over. There were shitty potties, leaky pales, and worn-out brooms by the doors. I could smell the food made of chitlings, which made me want to throw up immediately. People looked at us curiously as we marched past them. They were probably thinking, all right, here are some new inhabitants of Augusztá Enclosure. (216-217)<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> "Kötekedett meg sírt" (75).

<sup>80</sup> "Jó érzés volt, hogy én nem falun élek, hanem városban. Közben sajnáltam is öreganyámat, hogy neki a fálusiak szörnyű életét kell élnie, és neki újból vissza kell menni oda (73).

<sup>81</sup> "Végre megjelent előttünk a telep, aminek örültünk, mert megszabadulhattunk a nehéz terhünkötől. ... Minden képzeletemet felül múlta az elém tárult látvány. Itt volt ám csóróság. Csak úgy büzlött, füstölt tőle az egész Augusztá. Na és azok a formák! Ahogy az emberek ott kinéztek, hát az világi volt, olyan simlisek, kopottak voltak. Gyerek, az volt bőségesen, meztelen seggel futkostak, az asszonyok az ajtó előtt mostak, a mosott ruhák kihúzott spárgán lógtak elnyűtten. Az ajtó előtt szaros bilik, lyukas vödörök, elkopott söprűk. A levegőben megéreztem a belsőségekből főzött ételek szagát, amitől máris öklendezni kezdtem. Az emberek kíváncsian néztek bennünket, ahogy mentünk el előttük. Gondolhatták rólunk, hogy na, mi is Augusztá-lakók lettünk" (216-217).

While the poverty and destitution in this inter-racial slum were indeed extreme, Hilda's aversion to it must be seen in the context of her attachment to her beloved home. As elsewhere in the book, poverty itself is not a reason for despondency. Just as poverty at home brings the people closer together, it is the same factor that makes her life at Augusztá enduring: "Now that I think back on it, the way the poor people moved in and out of each other's flats was wonderful. They knew everything about each other, they helped each other, they cried, laughed, complained, and argued together. These common experiences of destitution connected people to each other. There was nothing to hide or keep secret from each other" (234).<sup>82</sup> Without downplaying the serious social criticism present in Péliné's descriptions of Augusztá Enclosure, it must be noted that Hilda's irrational behavior of hatred and escape there serves to emphasize her attachment to her home in contrast to any other place. Uncharacteristically of herself, she escapes from her family, back to the city center, even realizing that "it's not that far away" (220).<sup>83</sup> While her main complaint against Bajna seemed to be that her mother was not there, here she escapes from her mother and family to stay with a cousin in central Budapest. The emotional turmoil caused by being broken between the love of her family and the love of her home is in stark contrast to the overall emotional security exhibited elsewhere, and emphasizes that Hilda's attachment to Józsefváros is more than a child's security with her family. After her escape, she lives with her aunt for two weeks, only to conclude her stay with the following contradictory emotions: "I waited very much to be with my family and finally put an end to my cowardice ... As much as I was aware of my sin and fault [of

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<sup>82</sup> "Ahogy visszagondolok rá, csodálatos volt, hogy a szegény emberek zavartalanul jöttek-mentek, egyik lakásból a másikba. Tudtak egymásról mindent, segítették egymást, együtt sírtak, nevettek, panaszkodtak, veszekedtek. Ezek az együtt megélt nyomorúságos élmények kötötték össze az embereket. Nem volt mit takargatni, titkolni egymás elől" (234).

<sup>83</sup> "nem is olyan hosszú ez az út" (220).

having escaped from the family], I could still not digest the fact that from now on I would have to live at Augusztá" (230).<sup>84</sup>

Hilda also sets the limits of her Budapest home in time. She frequently emphasizes that her childhood world was better than the present world. For example, she writes about singing at restaurants that "[b]ack then, we could still have a good time; singing aloud was not considered shameful" (152).<sup>85</sup> Describing coffee houses in the city, she jokingly blames their disappearance on some secret "murderer:" "To this day, I cannot understand the smiling murderer, who got rid of cafés. ... The beauty and enchantment of the city's Ring Street are gone" (154).<sup>86</sup> But even the administrative procedures of various offices seem to have been better during her childhood: "I always have to make comparisons—how much better they could simplify paperwork back in the past" (250).<sup>87</sup> These and many other remarks about the "good old times" call attention to the subjectivity of an elderly person reminiscing about her childhood. But it is exactly this acknowledgment of her own subjectivity in this matter that calls attention to her attempts at giving an overall objective picture.

Thus, we can say that Péliné creates an idealized home in the center of Budapest, a home that is not unlike the idealized place of Eatonville for Hurston. But this home is framed within the dangers and sufferings of other places: the school, the countryside, the outskirts, and the slum. The reader thus gets a glimpse of two types of worlds. The stark realities of the life of poor Gypsies are separated from Hilda's somewhat idealized

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<sup>84</sup> "Már alig vártam, hogy a családommal legyek, és hogy végre befejezzem ezt a szégyenletes gyávaságom. ... Bárhoggy is tudtam a bűnömet meg a hibámat, de valahogy a lelkem mélyén még mindig nem tudtam megemészteni, hogy ezek után mégis Augusztán kell élnem" (230).

<sup>85</sup> "Akkoriban még lehetett mulatni, nem volt szégyen a nótázás" (152).

<sup>86</sup> "Még a mai napig sem tudom megérteni azt a mosolygó gyilkost, ... mikor megszüntette a kávéházakat. ... Ma már a Körút szépsége és varázsa a múlté" (154).

<sup>87</sup> "Mindig összehasonlítást kell tennem, hogy a múltban mennyivel jobban is le tudták egyszerűsíteni a sok süket papírformát" (250).

childhood world in a way that is similar to but the reverse of Wright's way of presenting the South. Wright displayed the harsh realities of the Jim Crow South by emphasizing his homelessness in a cruel world, but separately described the more positive childhood memories in a few poetic catalogues of beauty. Péliné, on the contrary, depicts a positive image of her home environment, but separately describes the harsh realities by inserting images of her negative experiences at other places and times. In this way, Péliné presents an image of minority life that calls attention to the effects of destitution and discrimination while at the same time asserting her personal strength and ability to appreciate and create cultural values.

As we have seen, Hilda's mother is one of the central characters in her book. The image of the idealized mother, however, is relativized, just as the image of the idealized home is relativized, calling attention to the creative work of the author. While her good home is framed by other terrible places, thus calling attention to the realities of everyday life, the mother's goodness is qualified by the slipperiness of her character. By calling attention to the changeability of her mother, Péliné destroys images of unified selves, and creates what Trefzer calls a "self in hiding," as does Hurston, who "emphasizes alterity and flexibility as strategies of self-representation" (Trefzer, "Floating Homes" 73). Even though the mother is heroicized throughout, the slippery and changeable nature of her character is also emphasized, showing a "view of the self as a fluid and changing concept" (Trefzer, "Floating Homes" 71). Examples include getting extremely angry with Hilda only to praise her to the heavens a few minutes later. The mother is able to say: "I'll pull out your hair, you have got plenty of it anyway, for God's sake, there is no sense talking to you, you bring deadly peril on us" only to follow up two sentences later with

the question, "How could you have so much brains, daughter?" (80-81).<sup>88</sup> At another time, she "got up angrily from the bench" only to say to her daughter, "I am not angry with you, daughter"<sup>89</sup> (164-165). By characterizing her mother in this way, Hilda accomplishes two things. On the one hand, she distances herself from the otherwise adored and loved mother, showing a more objective viewpoint. She can see in her mother these changes, but she knows that not all the mother says needs to be taken seriously. On the other hand, she creates out of her main heroine a self that is not unitary, that is floating just like the home. While Hilda often stresses her own affinity with gadjos, the mother is portrayed as a "typical" Roma woman. She is compared to "a real Roma woman, [who] started to talk, expressing what she was saying with her hands and mimicry" (226).<sup>90</sup> Further, she "made her opinion and her feelings known quite loudly" (173).<sup>91</sup> But all such generalizations fail when we see that the mother's changeability is her most constant character. Thus, the mother escapes definition, finalization, and compartmentalization. Again, the portrayal of the mother's character is the reverse of Wright's, yet the overall effects are similar. Wright's strict and cruel mother was rejected by Richard early in his life, but her enduring presence at the side of her son throughout the part of his life described in *Black Boy* revealed the significance of her influence on Richard. Hilda's mother is a positive character whose influence on her daughter's life is obvious, but descriptions of her changeability reveal Hilda's ability to view her from a critical distance. In this way, both mothers escape a finalizing definition by the children

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<sup>88</sup> "Én kiszedem a hajad, úgyis elég sok van, az anyád istenit, hát hiába beszélek neked, most is rám hozod a halálos nyavalyát. ... Hát hogyan is volt ennyi eszed, te leány?" (80-81).

<sup>89</sup> "Ült a padon, amikor dühösen felpattant ... már nem is vagyok mérges rád, leányom" (164-165).

<sup>90</sup> "Igazi roma asszony módjára elkezdte a nagy vakert, amit kezével, az arcjátékával még jobban kifejezett" (226).

<sup>91</sup> "Anyám nagy hangosan nyilvánította ki a véleményét, érzéseit" (173).

as authors. At the same time, both mothers endure in the presence of their children, suggesting the continued presence of the children as inside members of the family.

But in the final analysis, Hilda's own character is just as slippery as her mother's. What separates Hilda from her mother, the writer's critical portrayal of the mother as a changeable Roma woman, is also what connects the two. Hilda also has a changeable and impulsive personality, taking after her mother in her ability to change her mind and mood easily. And in that sense, Hilda also resembles Zora Neale Hurston, who included an entire chapter in *Dust Tracks on the Road* to describe her changeable feelings in love. In both cases, therefore, their "floating homes" are homes of "floating selves." By emphasizing her "floating" self, Hilda aligns herself with her mother and other Roma women, thus attesting to her position as a true insider. But this floating self, her impulsive nature, also allows her to present multiple views of Roma culture, assuming the various positions of admiration, affection, pity, and criticism.

### **Lakatos's Home: Three Ways of Looking at Gypsy Life**

Lakatos, perhaps most explicitly among the four authors, uses an unusual narrative structure, markedly shifting his authorial position twice to offer various angles of looking at the Gypsy community in rural Hungary. While the book lacks any formal divisions, it can easily be divided into three major parts, with Boncza taking different roles in each. In the first section, he lives with his family in Gypsy Paris, and the story revolves around themes of his relationship with his parents, his early education, and Roma life in this community. In this first part, Lakatos establishes Gypsy Paris as his home, a home that can also be categorized as "unhomely" because of his "paradoxical

identification with it" (Trefzer, "Let Us All Be" 70). He is very much aware of the poverty, destitution, and discrimination existing there; yet, he paints the image of a true home, with strong emotional ties to family and friends. Descriptions of the home suggest warmth and safety inside, in spite of the lurking threats of hunger, violence, and police brutality. Boncza's education is commenced, as described above, upon the mother's insistence. Most of the feelings and observations here are stated in the first-person plural, suggesting the protagonist's union with the Gypsy community. In the middle section of the book, comprising more than a third of the entire narrative (pp 164-337), Boncza lives with another community of Gypsy field workers and day laborers. Here, he maintains the aura of being an outsider throughout his stay, even though his first sexual experience and the ensuing entanglement with the girl's family happen here. With this narrative turn, Boncza becomes truly one of the group, while being able to maintain a critical distance that would not have been possible with his parents' family. In this section, Lakatos comments more critically upon certain customs, beliefs, and patterns of behavior practiced in this particular Gypsy community. Through the portrayal of Boncza's "wife's" family, Lakatos gives an ethnographic rendering of a destitute group of Gypsies bearing the marks of broken traditions, senseless family feuds, and hopeless poverty. The final section of the book sees Boncza at home in Gypsy Paris once again, but changed by the experiences of the middle section and the education received so far. Unlike in the first section, here he keeps a critical distance from his family and community members, maintaining the emotional ties of an insider but also the objectivity of an outsider. Meanwhile, his education continues in the nearby city, exposing him to a hopeless love affair with a Hungarian girl, atrocities suffered at school, and the racial incidents

connected to the approach of World War II. In some ways, he is like a returning child in this section, looking at his own community with the eyes of an autoethnographer.

In the first section of the book (pp 7-163), Lakatos establishes his home in Gypsy Paris. This is described as certainly a place of disadvantage, yet a place that gives him the security and warmth of a childhood home. The physical hardships, difficulties, and discrimination the Gypsies had to endure here make Boncza's hometown similar to Wright's, but unlike Wright, Lakatos describes his own home as a refuge of safety and warmth. Like Wright, Lakatos describes the hunger, racial separation, and intellectual destitution that was characteristic of life here. The stark realities of living here can be seen in passages like the following:

To stay warm and eat. This was the worry of every day. Every day brought with it hopelessness and hungry stomachs. The multitude of tiny mouths craved for food, and the nakedness asked for clothes. But what could be done in the middle of snow-storms that piled up the snow to the roofs of the houses? ... To live, this is the only law against which there can be no appeal. (65)<sup>92</sup>

And Boncza himself was a part of the community living with this difficulty; his life at this point was not separate from his family and others in Gypsy Paris. Unlike Wright, who emphasizes that his sufferings are extraordinary among his peers and separate him from his family, the sufferings of Boncza are part of the rest of the community here. The community's unity, along with his own being part of it, is emphasized—for example, when the people put together the money for the funeral of an unfortunate woman who committed suicide: "They put together a few metal coins as if pulled out of their very

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<sup>92</sup> "Melegedni és enni! Ez volt a holnap gondja. Minden nap meghozta a maga kilátástalanságát, a korgó gyomrokat, és a sok aró éhes szájat ennivalóval, a ruhátlanságot és a hideget tűzrevalóval kellett enyhíteni. De mit lehetett tenni a házgerincig érő hófúvások idején? A napokig tartó szúrós szélviharokban a kutyát sem lehetett kizavarni. ... Élmi, ez az egyetlen törvény, ami ellen nem lehet fellebbezés" (65).

poverty. I myself gave my twenty fillérs" (36).<sup>93</sup> There are several other examples where the unfriendly environment of poverty and destitution is contrasted with the closeness and warmth of the community itself.

Boncza himself finds a warm home in this community in spite of the communal pain and sufferings he describes. In stark contrast to Wright, Boncza's relationship is particularly strong with his grandmother, and this relationship symbolizes his unusually strong ties to both to old Gypsy traditions and the childhood security he felt at home. "I climbed in to Mámi's warm corner ... I don't remember what she said, but I remember her humming of a tune, reaching me as a childhood memory, faintly as if I did not even hear it, but simply felt it. I was very good at sleeping" (35).<sup>94</sup> Boncza seems to prefer his grandmother, Mámi, over his own parents. But this is done not to emphasize any particular rift between him and his parents but rather to align himself with Gypsy traditions to a degree greater than usual in the community. In this sense, his position at the beginning of the book is that of a true insider, who is set apart from his parents only insofar as he has some extraordinary ties to the past through the grandmother's traditions and to the future through his own early education. The scene during his serious illness illustrates his special alliance with the grandmother and a tie to Gypsy traditions that build on and alter mainstream cultural norms, such as Christian prayers:

I did not let anybody close to me, except Mámi. She secretly wetted the corner of her handkerchief in the firewater<sup>95</sup> so as to soften my feverish, swollen, dry lips. Then she wiped my mouth not only on the outside, by the inside as well. She was sitting at my head, with her hair let down, unceasingly whispering prayers in

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<sup>93</sup> "Szinte a szegénységükből csípték le azt a néhány rézkrajcárt, amiből emberségesebb temetést rendeztek a halottnak. Én is odaadtam a húsz filléremet" (36).

<sup>94</sup> "Bebújtam Mámi meleg vackába ... a válaszára nem emlékszem, a dúdolásra nagyon távolról még eljutott hozzám, mint kisgyermek kori emlék, egész halványan, nem hallottam, csak éreztem. Alvásból páromat ritkítottam" (35).

<sup>95</sup> firewater = pálinka, a strong alcoholic drink made from fermented fruits, usually plum or peach.

Gypsy language, which contained everything from repentance of sins to promises of sacrifice. The curses upon our enemies were always followed by the first line of the Our Father. Amaro dad Devla, kon szan and o cséri.<sup>96</sup> The rest of it was improvisation. (48)<sup>97</sup>

Mámi's death is one of those few emotional moments in the story in which Boncza allows a glimpse of the depths of his feelings. In the passage after her death, he once again emphasizes his special relationship with this woman of the past. Even her language set her apart from the following generations, yet with Boncza, she had special ties. In a book about a world where lasting emotions are not emphasized, Boncza uses the death-scene to emphatically state his own unusually strong emotions towards his grandmother. But this strong attachment does not alienate him from others of the community; rather, it reinforces his belonging and rootedness in the traditions the community still felt its own while experiencing their gradual slipping out of their reach:

We had been truly good friends. She could read my thoughts best. Whenever I wanted something, both of us wanted it. She did not know much Hungarian, and her strange use of words made everybody smile, but all Gypsies loved her. After her death, they tactfully avoided mentioning her name when I was there, knowing that I would start crying for my aching heart. (73)<sup>98</sup>

The importance of old folk traditions beyond the personal relationship with the grandmother is emphasized by the introduction of another elderly character, the figure of Khandi. The following excerpts, more than any other in the book, illustrate the community's respect for its own past and own culture, even while feeling that it is

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<sup>96</sup> "Our Father, who art in heaven," said in Gypsy language (NOT in Hungarian).

<sup>97</sup> "Senkit nem engedtem magam mellé Mámin kívül. Titokban megnedvesítette a kendője sarkát pálinkával, hogy láztól megduzzadt, cserepes számat megpuhítsa. Aztán nemcsak kívül, hanem belül is megtörölgette. A fejemnél ült leeresztett hajjal, fáradhatatlanul mormolt cigányul egy imát, amiben bűnbánástól az áldozatígérésig minden volt. Az ellenségeinkre szórt átkokat mindig a Miatyánk első sora követte. Amaro dad Devla, kon szan and o cséri. A többit rögtönözte" (48).

<sup>98</sup> "Igazi jó barátok voltunk. Ő tudta legjobban kiolvasni a gondolataimat, ha valamit akartam, ketten akartuk. Keveset tudott magyarul, nyakatekert szavai mindenkit mosolyra derítettek, szerette minden cigány. Előttem sokáig nem merték kiejteni a nevét, olyankor elszorult a szívem, akaratlanul is elsírtam magam" (73).

slipping through their fingers. The tales of Khandi, a relative of Boncza on both his parents' sides, bring back the past. Boncza's special relationship with the old man shows his particular attachment to a culture that later he will keep alive in his community, and, even later than that, he, as writer and ethnographer Menyhért Lakatos, will spend a lifetime describing, popularizing, and saving:

Old Khandi was my uncle on my father's side and brother-in-law on my mother's side. He spent his time from fall to spring de-feathering geese. His hut was the only place in the community where everybody could go at any time, and there was no regret in spending the night there. Songs, dances, games, and tales followed each other in never-ending succession, like in a house of perpetual entertainment. At times, his hut was entirely full, even though it was among the larger ones. Khandi's short stature, grey hair, and beard were well respected. Perhaps it was not his age they respected most, but his endless imagination. Every night, he poured onto us new and new stories. His narratives lasted from evening till morning, full of adventure, bravery, and love.

We'd listen to him in awe, not doubting the truth of his stories for a second. We believed, because all life gave us was just enough room for us to all fit in; we had to escape into another world, peopled with giants and lovely old women riding on brooms, good and bad spirits determining our fates ...

By the way, I always sat next to him on the bed. ... There was a fire in the hut both day and night. (61, 64)<sup>99</sup>

Thus, even in this first section, Lakatos, while truly an insider, establishes his position as one who pays a little more attention to and knows a little more about Gypsy folk tradition than others. He is at home in and truly belongs to this home, but his budding education, along with the attention to folk ways, set him on the track of being an autoethnographer. But this does not make him an outsider; on the contrary, he aligns himself with others

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<sup>99</sup> "Az öreg Khandi apámról unokanagybátyám, anyámról sógorom volt. Ősztől tavaszig tollfosztással foglalkozott. Konyhája egyetlen olyan helye volt a telepnek, ahová mindenki eljárhatott, és nem kellett sajnálni az átvirrasztott éjszakát. Nóták, táncok, játékok és mesék váltották egymást, mint az örök vigadóban. Néha nem akadt tenyérnyi hely, pedig nem a kis putrik közé tartozott. Khandi kis termetét, ősz haját és szakállát tekintély övezte. Talán nem is csak a korát tisztelték, hanem határtalan fantáziáját. Minden este más és más történeteket öntött belénk. Elbeszélései estétől reggelig tartottak, tele izgalmas kalandokkal, vitézséggel és szerelemmel. Áhítattal hallgattuk, egy percre sem kételkedett senki a történet valóságában. Hittük, mert nekünk éppen csak annyi nyújtott az élet, hogy szűkösen elfértünk egymás mellett; át kellett menekülnünk a másik világba, ahol óriások éltek, bűbajos öregasszonyok nyargalták a seprűt, és jó vagy rossz szellemek döntöttek sorsunk felett. ... Egyébként is mindig mellette ültem az ágyon, nyomkodtam a lábát. ... A konyhóban éjjel-nappal égett a tűz" (61, 64).

both in their outward and inward ways. This is what he states when he compares his superstition to that of others: "Outwardly, I, too, despised superstitious beliefs, but inside, I could not get rid of them" (120).<sup>100</sup>

In the second major part of the book, Lakatos turns to a different narrative strategy. Though he fits this section into the book on the level of the plot, in reality the narrative position changes dramatically. Here, Boncza is in a new community of Gypsies, one where he is an alien, but becomes part of a family by sleeping with a girl (which is considered "marrying" her, at least "for a while"). In this section, critical, extraordinary, and sexually explicit events and facts are rendered that could not have been written about his own family or friends. Thus, he occupies an outsider's position, a position of critical wondering at the lifestyles and beliefs of this "other" Gypsy family and people. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that this community is not altogether different from his home community. There are many old acquaintances, as he observes upon his arrival: "I saw many familiar faces among the Gypsies lying close to each other" (174).<sup>101</sup> Once he enters their world, he becomes one of them through his "marriage," becoming a true participant in the events. Thus, he possesses the view of an insider while still maintaining the outsider position of the distant observer.

When he arrives at the living quarters of these Gypsy day laborers, the first thing Boncza sees is a man beating his wife. The cruelty with which Kékhús, the husband, beats his wife and the insensitivity with which the other Gypsies watch the spectacle are so negative and repulsive that the reader cannot imagine something like that happening in Boncza's original home, Gypsy Paris. While the people are watching the bloody scene of

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<sup>100</sup> "Kifelé én is megvettem a babonás hitet, de belül nem tudtam szabadulni tőle" (120).

<sup>101</sup> "A sűrűn egymás mellett heverő cigányok között még mindig nagyon sok ismerőst láttam" (174).

an unfaithful wife's sufferings at her husband's hands, Boncza arrives as an outsider, intervening as only an outsider can. His defense of the woman marks his entrance into this community, where he will learn to behave as a man both in the sense of sleeping with a girl and in the sense of standing up against injustice and inhumanity committed by others. In the following passages, he describes himself as a stranger, emphasizes his anger, shows his impulsive nature, and eventually establishes his stance on the side of justice even in the face of opposition. He calls himself an alien and, unlike everybody else, he intervenes in the fight, severely beating the raving Kékhús with the same hoe handle he used to beat up his wife. But as Boncza is thus distinguished from the rest of the group, he also gains acclaim for his sense of justice, braveness, and strength. Thus, he gains entrance into this group of Gypsies:

There was nothing to be seen in the woman's beaten, swollen, bloody face. I made my way closer to the arena set out by the hoe's handle, but the sight did not enthrall me very much; I rather felt blood surging to my head. ... They did not even notice that an alien newcomer was among them; they all wanted to get closer to the scene of action. (167)<sup>102</sup>

Timidly, the woman tried to rise. The ground was red from her blood. There were coagulated clots of blood on the bricks tied to her long black hair on both sides. She tried to lift her head from the stone flooring. ... I regretted coming forward, but I could not take my eyes off the beaten woman. As she tried to lift her hand as if asking for help, I saw a streak of light in her eyes, which seemed to show not only entreaty but also hope. ...

Only fragments of the curses reached my consciousness. I saw the scared eyes of Kékhús, as the hoe's handle [already in my hand] cut across the air and broke just over his eyebrows. Kékhús jumped into the brush, emitted some scared womanly sound, tried to grab onto something, as his blood sprinkled on the people around him. He lay across the rails. (169)<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> "Az asszony ütésektől véresre duzzadt arcából nem lehetett mit kinézni. Közelebb furakodtam a kijelölt fordulóhoz, amit a kapanyél jelzett, a látvány nem ragadott túlságosan magával, inkább azt éreztem, hogy a fejembe tódul a vér ... Észre sem vették, hogy egy ismeretlen új jövevény van közöttük, mindenki azon igyekezett, hogy előrébb furakodjon" (167).

<sup>103</sup> "Az asszony nagyon félénken, de megpróbált felemelkedni, arcától vereslett a kő. A kétoldalt lelógó, hosszú fekete hajához kötözött téglákon apró, alvadt vércsomók nyúlottak, ahogy fájdalomtól eltorzult arccal felemelte a kőpadlóról. ... Már bántam, hogy előrefurakodtam, de nem tudtam levenni a szemem az összevert asszonyról, segélykérően fel akarta emelni a kezét, egy villanásnyi fényt láttam a szemében, ami

Later, when one of the elders, Papu, asks him who he is, he replies in Gypsy language, "Péterestyó, munro nano" (179),<sup>104</sup> to emphasize his Gypsy nature, but they reply to him, "He is from far away, he says whatever he wants" (179).<sup>105</sup> Later, they tell him, "[t]hen you are from the dogs" (181),<sup>106</sup> an insult for which he could have "pierced their throats" (181).<sup>107</sup> But rather than doing that, he wittily turns the insult into a sign of Gypsy strength, emphasizing his belonging to a group of strength and tradition: "Yes, our people used to be called dzsuklo manus"<sup>108</sup> (181).<sup>109</sup> He emphasizes his outsider-ness in the group of people in such descriptions as, "I envied them. They were moving around on top of each other, in a sameness, without differences" (185).<sup>110</sup> There is thus a complex play of his being an insider and an outsider: a Gypsy from far away, yet a knower of Gypsy modes of behavior; an insulted alien, yet an admirable friend.

Even while sleeping with a girl for the first time in his life, Boncza maintains an aura of distance and sarcastic critical observations. While lusting eagerly for the girl, Vorzsa, he makes critical observations, such as the following comparison: "I saw her face as somewhat longer than the generally cat-faced Gypsy girls" (177).<sup>111</sup> Later, as the laborers go to sleep in the huge barn where they were given lodging, Boncza is given a place in a manger, near the family of Vorzsa, a place from where he could look over the

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nemcsak könyörgésre, hanem reményre is emlékeztetett. A többi átokból apró foszlányok jutottak el a tudatomig. Kékhús riadt szemei villogtak, a kapanyél zúgva átszelte a levegőt, aztán kettétört szemöldöke felett, nekiugrott az ágasnak, reszkető női hang tört fel a torkán, kapaszkodni akart, szétfröccsenő vére elriasztotta a körülállókat, tántorogva keresztben elterült a síneken" (169).

<sup>104</sup> "I belong to the Péterestyó clan, my elder brother" (179).

<sup>105</sup> "Messziről jött ember azt mond, amit akar" (179).

<sup>106</sup> "Akkor te, hé, a kutyáktól vagy" (181).

<sup>107</sup> "átdöfni a torkát" (181).

<sup>108</sup> dzsuklo manus = dog-man

<sup>109</sup> "Igen, a mi fajtánk embereit úgy is hívták, hogy dzsuklano manus" (181).

<sup>110</sup> "Irigyeltem őket. Egymás hegyén-hátán nyüzsögtek, különbség nélküli egyformaságban" (185).

<sup>111</sup> "Valamivel hosszabbnak láttam az arcát, mint az átlagosan megszokott macskafejű cigánylányokét" (177).

sleeping community. His blinding desire for the girl is mixed with very sober and sarcastic remarks about her family and the community as a whole:

Vorzsa was lying in front of the manger. Catching a glimpse of her brown breasts under her spaghetti-strapped shirt, all normal thoughts abandoned me. I felt that she was not sleeping, either ... The entire world around me was full of naked butts, endless itching and scratching. The noise of the swift movement of hungry rats was stifled by the noise people made by scratching their body hair. ... I could feel the faint smell of Vorzsa over the side of the manger, and my blood was burning within me. (184)<sup>112</sup>

So, by the use of the symbolism of being somewhat above them and overlooking them, we get the voice of an outsider, someone who has the objectivity to make critical remarks on this community. But carefully blended with these remarks are the remarks on his own passionate desires, attesting to his oneness with them and his alliance that is to be formed.

By sleeping with this girl, Vorzsa, Boncza becomes entangled in the intricate, dirty story of her family, becoming a first-hand experiencer of dirty family-feuds involving money, revenge, and incest. This situation allows Lakatos to report as an insider on situations of much more serious destitution and uprootedness than what he has written about his original home, Gypsy Paris. For example, his "mother-in-law," Ballus, tricks him into sleeping with her by pretending to be Vorzsa in the depth of the night. Later, she claims to have done it as a revenge on her husband's family. But even during the description of the outrageous and incredible story of this family, Boncza describes his own feelings and emotions in a way not to separate but to align himself with them. He manages to simultaneously insist on his entanglement in the situation by presenting the depth of his emotional involvement, and on his critical distance by sarcastic observations

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<sup>112</sup> "A jászol előtt Vorzsa feküdt. Szalagpántos ingéből kivillanó barna héjú mellei minden normális gondolatot elűztek belőlem. Éreztem, hogy ő sem alszik. ...Csupa mezítelen segg volt körülöttem a világ, szünet nélküli vakarózás. A gyapjas szőrök hersegése között elvegyült az élelem után kutató patkányok fürge vágója. ... Vorzsa szaga átcapott a jászol peremén, saját vérem hevében égtem" (184).

only an outsider can make. When Ballus comes to sleep with him, he believes it's Vorzsa, so their love scene seems in place:

The dark figure of Vorzsa moved swiftly across the worn tracks and, hopping along silently, she disappeared behind a tree. She looked around and, sitting next to me, she picked up my head and put it in her lap. ... Something ran across her and across me, too, and I reached under her skirt, feeling her smooth thighs. She slowly lay back, pulling me with her, and opening up my bulging trousers. I lost my head in passionate desire, and by the time I realized what was going on, it was too late: Ballus managed to get what she wanted. (233)<sup>113</sup>

What is really shocking in this situation is not just the way Ballus pretends to be her own daughter in order to avenge her husband's family, but Boncza's own admittance of his complicity in the situation, as he continues: "I saw no reason to sigh about it, sooner or later everything that has to happen will happen. Such thoughts had been in my mind all day long anyway, at times out of revenge, at times out of curiosity ... Ballus was right from her own point of view" (233).<sup>114</sup> We know from the story that Ballus had plenty of reason to take revenge on her husband's family, as she explains right afterwards, in her long narrative (pp 234-245). But clearly, there is no reason why Boncza would want to take revenge upon anybody in this family; so, his statement that he had a desire for the mother-in-law all day "out of revenge" seems to be an internalizing of her feelings rather than a true account of his own. The amazing narrative strategy of Lakatos here, thus, is the way he describes the extremities of this Gypsy family's story by aligning himself with them both physically and emotionally. Boncza becomes a participant in their story not only on the level of the plot, but also on the level of feelings and understanding.

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<sup>113</sup> "Vorzsa sötét alakja átlibbent a kitaposott síneken, zajtalan ugrásokkal eltűnt a fa mögött, körülkémlelt, aztán mellém ülve megemelte a fejem, mint az alvó emberét, ölébe helyezte. ... Valami rajta is átfutott, rajtam is, benyúltam a szoknyája alá, sima combjai elernyedtek, lassan hátradőlt, magával húzott, fürgé ujjai kiszabadították nadrágom feszülő erejét, s mire vérbe borult agyamon átréselte magát a felismerés világossága, már minden késő volt, Ballus elérte amit akart" (233).

<sup>114</sup> "Nem találtam okot a sóhajtozásra, előbb vagy utóbb úgyis minden bekövetkezik. Egész nap úgyis ez forgott az agyamban, hol bosszúból, hol egyszerű kíváncsiságból. ... Neki is igaza volt a maga módján" (233).

Nevertheless, Boncza's life of course will not be entangled with them for a long time, and his extra understanding as an outsider comes through such sentences as: "I had the cold creeps realizing that she was the first madwoman I had seen in my life" (245).<sup>115</sup>

Lakatos thus fully involves Boncza in those aspects of Gypsy life that could not fit into the story of his own family and education. Besides the emotional entanglement with the family of Vorzsa and Ballus, Boncza's friendship with Bada is also an example of this. Bada is portrayed as a somewhat strange eccentric; nevertheless, Boncza is a good friend of his and their stories are linked in the middle section of the book. In many ways, Bada embodies many Gypsy stereotypes, such as trickiness, a predilection to stealing, and irresponsibility. By forging a close friendship between Boncza and Bada, Lakatos accomplishes two things. First, as Bada is considered strange by all, it is suggested that these stereotypical modes of behavior are not true for or even approved of the majority of the Gypsy population. Second, Boncza's attachment to Bada aligns him with these modes of behavior in a special way, thus enabling him to give an account of first-hand experiences. Thus, throughout this middle section of the book, he experiences strange and new cultural situations, and experiences them not as a curious outsider, but as a truly involved insider: "Then I realized that all I considered as new were the same old images turned upside down or inside out. Willingly or not, I became a part of this image" (205).<sup>116</sup>

The third example of Boncza's image as both an insider and an outsider in the middle section of the book is the striking scene of "passing" as a non-Gypsy "overseer" among the Gypsy laborers. The scene is foreshadowed when he compares himself to a

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<sup>115</sup> "Hideg borzongás rázott meg, életemben először találkoztam örülttel" (245).

<sup>116</sup> "Aztán rájöttem, hogy mindaz, amit újnak véltem, csupán a régi képek, fejük tetejére állítva vagy bensejükkel kifelé fordítva. Akarva, nem akarva magam is felkerültem a képre" (205).

policeman in announcing his relationship with Vorzsa to her father: "Get up, Zselko, I married your girl. Let's drink' - I practiced saying it, so as to find a haughty police voice. I wanted to make sure I'd remember speaking like that" (188).<sup>117</sup> Ironically, a little later, he actually saves himself from the police looking for him because of Bada's crime by actually "passing" as an overseer, a gadjo supervisor to the Gypsy laborers. This scene works on two levels, too. On the one hand, it is his mother-in-law, Ballus, and another girl, Rilyándri, who give him a nice shirt accidentally left there by an overseer. Thus, they protect him from the police, saving him and aligning him with the family. On the other hand, wearing this nicely ironed clean shirt, he realizes his ability to speak with the policemen with the language, intonation, and aura of an educated person. Thus, the police are tricked into believing he is a gadjo overseer, and he himself realizes his own potentials and desires to move on. The parting words of the police become ironically true: "I envy you, young man, you must have had a nice holiday here" (232).<sup>118</sup> In a strange way, his "marriage" to Vorzsa and his entanglement with their family becomes only a "holiday" in his life story, as he returns to his own home and continues his education in the city during the third section of the book. His contradictory position of being both an insider and an outsider to this community can be seen in the following passage of contradictory feelings about a world that is both "merry" and "full of ulcers:"

My roots have grown out of here, out of this always merry world. I have felt its stifling and untrue air, but, being born here, I could not think of anything other than this being the order of things. Why should we wail? What is the use of displaying our bodies full of ulcers, what is the use of showing off our mutilated

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<sup>117</sup> "Kelj fel, Zselko, elvettem a lányod! Gyere ígynk! – suttoztam magamban. Néhányszor el kellett mondanom, mire találtam valami gögös, parancsoló csendőrhangozt. Csak ki ne menjen a fülemből" (188).

<sup>118</sup> "Irigylem, fiatalúr, jól eltelhetett a nyári szünidő" (232).

brains? Doesn't everyone suffer from the same thing? Some admit it, others don't. (206)<sup>119</sup>

In the third great section of the book, Boncza once again lives at home in Gypsy Paris, but his authorial stance as an outsider becomes more emphasized. His family and friends consider him with the respect due to an educated outsider. He develops a love affair with a "Hungarian" girl, Cicus, who does not realize that he is a Gypsy. And his schooling in the city ensures his education and artistic development, while at the same time exposing him to the realities of racial discrimination and hatred.

Besides the already mentioned distance he feels from his mother and her beliefs after his arrival back home, Boncza becomes distanced from his community as his education progresses. One humorous example of this is when they want him to write a letter to the emperor, not knowing that the Austro-Hungarian empire had collapsed more than 20 years earlier, that the emperor has been dead for more than 20 years, and that the country was led by a governor. Boncza explains to them with the language and good-will of a friend, as well as with the knowledge of an expert: "Two decades have passed, and all that happened here is that you became old like a bowl of bean-soup. I hate to dishearten you, but your emperor has been dead these 20 years" (353).<sup>120</sup> Even as he describes their ignorance, his humor softens his criticism and his use of the first-person plural aligns himself with them: "Some faint sadness came onto us all. This was our

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<sup>119</sup> "Innen nőttek ki gyökereim, ebből az örök jókedvű világból. Éreztem fullasztóan hazug levegőjét, de mivel ebben születtem nem gondolhattam másra, mint hogy így van rendjén. Minek jajgassunk? És ha kitakarjuk fekélyes testünket, ha világgá mutogatjuk csonka agyunkat, nem ebben szenved mindenki? Csak az egyik tagadja, a másik bevallja" (206).

<sup>120</sup> "Elmúlt két évtized, és itt csak annyi változott, hogy megöregedtetek úgy, mint a paszulyleves. Nem akarok senkit elkéséríteni, de a ti császárotok több mint húsz éve halott" (353).

custom at the news of all deaths. And then, with their forgiving smiles, they said, 'He was old, but wasn't a bad man, rest him in peace' (353).<sup>121</sup>

While Boncza still belongs to his family and friends in this third section, his emotional life takes him outside of the community as much as his education does. He falls in love with Cicus, a rich Hungarian merchant's daughter. The way he sits next to her on the train, not knowing what to say, makes this love affair the story of a student-love, in stark contrast to Boncza's earlier passionate and wild relationship with Vorzsa. His parents' advice and attitude are irrelevant and useless in his current situation. Nevertheless, he manages to "pass" once again, building up this relationship without letting on that he is a Gypsy. Therefore, his abilities and education make him an equal member of mainstream society, knowing its rules, customs, cultures as much as anyone else. From the point of view of his being as an author, this is another example of his position as an outsider to the Gypsy community, and an understanding of the mainstream society to which he addresses his book. From the point of view of his life, however, this is a clear demonstration of the brokenness of his life, marred by separation and discrimination. His father advises him to grab the hand of his beloved girl, to which he replies: "I had to smile at this suggestion, to hold her hand and take her home. Father said that this is the order of the world. But which world?" (361).<sup>122</sup> Eventually, he announces to Cicus that he is a Gypsy, but does not wait around to see her reaction.

Boncza's experiences in the city are marked by advancement in education but increasing racial discrimination as well. In an incident of being chased by the police for

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<sup>121</sup> "Valami enyhe szomorúság csapott közénk, általában minden halálhír esetén így szokás, aztán megbocsátó mosollyal az arcukon bólogattak, 'Öreg volt már, de nem volt rossz ember, magát említse'" (353).

<sup>122</sup> "Mosolyognom kellett apám javaslatán: fogjam meg a kezét és vigyem haza, mert ez a világnak a rendje. Melyik világnak?" (361).

racially motivated reasons, it is Cicus who rescues him, suggesting her acceptance of him even as a Gypsy. But Boncza returns to his family and his community, to suffer the ongoing trials of Gypsy deportations during World War II. His father remarks about him: "He could be a gentleman ... if only he knew how to use his brains. No one in the world could tell that he was a Gypsy" (391).<sup>123</sup> And in a way, Menyhért Lakatos did become a gentleman, an accepted and celebrated Roma author in Hungary, a reporter of Roma life, a link between Gypsy and Hungarian cultures, an ethnographer, an autoethnographer. But he accomplished this not by pretending to be a non-Gypsy, as his father suggested, but rather by embracing his Gypsy culture. In *Smoky Pictures*, he offers various ways of looking at that culture, most notably by assuming shifting narrative positions and thus calling attention to several parallel interpretations and representations of his complex culture and life-situation.

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<sup>123</sup> "Lehetne belőle úriember ... ha használni tudná az eszét. Mert róla a világon senki nem mondaná, hogy cigány" (391).

## **Part II. Dialogues of the Authors with the Majority Cultures**

### ***Introduction***

In the second major part of my dissertation I discuss relationships of the minority cultures with the majority cultures, particularly points of conflict and methods of resistance. Richard, Zora, Boncza, and Hilda all lived on the borderlines of their countries' cultures, growing up in their minority communities but also experiencing relationships with the majority cultures. As I have shown in Part I, their personal developments of getting educated, becoming well-known artists, or simply mingling in the majority societies distanced them from their own cultures, but did not make them become members of the majority cultures. The descriptions of contacts with the oppressive majorities vary greatly among the four books, calling attention to different social realities and different ways of experiencing oppression. In Chapter 3, I will concentrate on presentations of physical violence, that I consider the most visible and most shocking aspect of experiencing oppression. In Chapter 4, I will study the less spectacular ways of racial oppression and possible responses to these.

One of the most striking features of both Hungarian Roma and African American writings is the presence of rampant violence. While the narratives present violence and its effects in various ways, in each case, violence is the most palpable way of understanding the hardships of minority lives lived in the shadow of oppressing majorities. Scenes of violence are usually readily available to readers of various backgrounds and can serve to graphically illustrate the everyday dangers and pains that characterize the lives of oppressed minorities. Thus, while the study of the representations of mothers and homes

showed how these autoethnographic texts engage in the emotional aspects of protagonists' contested relationships with their own cultures, a study of violence reveals an equally emotional rendering of the depth and extent of the pains and difficulties resulting from contacts with the majority cultures.

Living in the face of constant physical danger, of the possibility of having one's body violated, is one of the most important experiences described in all four books. This is emphasized by the opening scenes: all four books relate some violent events on their first few pages. The various presentations and interpretations the writers give to violence indicate the great differences both among their social realities and their interpretations of the events. But a similarity is that the encounter with violence at the beginning of each book is in connection with family relationships, while at the same time also pointing towards the adjustments the protagonist will have to make in order to survive in a dangerous world. Thus, the violence is at once at home, affecting the psychological development of the child, and also related to the larger racial and social milieu in which the protagonist's life will unfold. In this way, these presentations of violence show that racial problems enter the private worlds of individuals and families.

Violence is much more accentuated in the narratives of the two male writers than in the female narratives. Wright's main point is to show how the effects of racism pervade the entire life of the oppressed individual and how one needs to be prepared for a life of violence. I will argue that the traumatic experiences of Wright make him realize that he is unable to appropriate the defense mechanisms adopted by most black people around him. This is why his book is centered around the notion of escape, but it is also shown that running away to the North does not solve the problem. Reading, writing, imagination,

and education offer an opening for Wright as a way of getting away from the traumatic world of violence. Lakatos also describes the extreme dangers presented by a hostile world, as well as suggesting ways in which to avoid being victimized by violence. He makes a clear distinction between violence among Gypsies and violence experienced from the majority society. With all its difficulties and problems, the former usually solves and settles problems, while the latter creates problems and initiates more violence.

The narratives of Hurston and Péliné contain much less violence than those of Wright and Lakatos. Nevertheless, a few violent scenes in their books call attention to the otherwise less accentuated racial problems. There are descriptions of some events in Hurston's book that, contrary to her main line of argument, show the extent to which racial discrimination affects the everyday lives of her people. With these few events, she suggests that she is very much aware of what she chooses to leave out of her narrative. Other violent scenes serve to reinforce one of her major points in her book: the importance to judge people on an individual basis rather than as simply members of racial or other groups. Péliné does not emphasize violence in her narrative because her focus is primarily on racial harmony. Her scary passages at the very beginning serve to call attention to the safety she enjoys in spite of the complex relationship of multiple races and widespread poverty in her city. Nevertheless, there are a few violent scenes later in her book that go against the grain of her major argument, allowing a glimpse of the serious dangers and difficulties of growing up Roma in the Budapest of the 1930s.

In Chapter 4, I will call attention to the unique intricacies of intercultural encounters as presented in these autoethnographic texts, in which "dominant and subordinated subjects interlock and interact despite histories of radically uneven

relations" (Smith and Watson 198). I will start the chapter with a brief introduction to theories of Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau, using their terminologies to call attention to the disciplinary nature of the societies described and possible ways of resistance. I am using Stephen Butterfield's phrase "restless movement" (167) to characterize the various modes of resistance utilized by the four protagonists. There is also a marked difference between the male authors' presentations of resisting social constraints and the female authors' descriptions of how to take advantage of small opportunities within these constraints.

Wright describes a world in which the nominally free black people are controlled and oppressed by what Butterfield terms "a world of random violence" (158). Because violence is erratic and unpredictable, most African Americans in Wright's book have developed modes of behavior to avoid violence or at least to minimize its effects. Wright describes himself as unable to do so. His way of trying to avoid this control can be characterized as a restless motion. Given the nature of oppression in his society, Richard cannot escape oppression the way slaves escaped their bondage in slave narratives. Thus, the directed movement towards the North that characterizes his book does not offer an effective mode of resistance. Richard's movements become uncertain and less directed, but some interpretations attribute a certain amount of inner freedom to survival techniques described in his picaresque-like restless movements. Lakatos's descriptions of the majority society's control over the lives of Gypsies also recall many of the disciplinary controls described by Foucault. Lakatos emphasizes the contrast between the lifestyle of traveling Gypsies in the past and the life of his own people, settled in an enclosure that is under the surveillance of the police and other institutions of social

control. He describes the futility of the behavior of those who do not understand the implications of these changes and still attempt to reconstruct aspects of the free-roaming lives of social outcasts. Boncza himself adopts a behavior of restless movement, taking advantage of his cleverness to avoid control by the police and to enjoy some amount of freedom. But he also realizes that he can only go against social constraints in the long term if he gains respect through education and mainstream behavior.

As opposed to Wright and Lakatos, who present the oppressing nature of their societies and their own difficult ways of trying to resist oppression, Hurston and Péliné seem to be less concerned with the power structures. Their versions of restless motion serve primarily not to resist oppression but rather to live out whatever freedom is available at the each given situation of their lives. Hurston describes herself as a wanderer both in space and in time. With this, she affirms her freedom and right to search for education, choose her jobs, select her friends, and live in artistic ways. Her emphasis is on what de Certeau calls the tactics of the weak, taking advantage of the little opportunities found even in the midst of oppression and difficulties. Rather than confronting racial issues head-on, Hurston emphasizes the importance of individual efforts and the responsibilities of the oppressed as well as the oppressor. Péliné is also a wanderer, even though her movements are limited to the parts of the city she calls home. But her movements here defy racial expectations and social norms, attesting to her ability to traverse lines of division. Like Hurston, Péliné emphasizes her freedom to defy expectations by going where she wants to and choosing her friends from the race she wants to. Her playful and imaginative behavior is another way to assert her individual freedom to cross racial boundaries and thus make connections between races.

### **Chapter 3. Violence and Racial Oppression**

#### **Violence in Wright: Violence Penetrating All Aspects of Life**

The violent events described at the beginning of Wright's *Black Boy* and Richard's responses to them throughout the book serve to establish the physical realities of racial oppression as it enters even the most private recesses of Richard's life. The violence in *Black Boy* comes from three directions: Richard suffers violence at the hands of his own family, he meets the violence of other blacks in the streets and in school, and there is the overarching threat of white violence controlling every aspect of black life. Many critics have studied and tried to make sense out of this huge amount of violence. I will briefly introduce the studies of Jerry H. Bryant, who makes careful distinctions among the various kinds of violence experienced by Richard, but will argue that the most important feature of violence in Wright seems to be its randomness as described by Butterfield. Its all-encompassing nature shows the traumatic experience of growing up in the Southern society. The violence at all levels in Richard's life shows the extent to which he is affected and serves to establish the description of his childhood as a trauma. However, a careful reading of certain violent scenes reveals that Wright, who saw no positive effects of violence, used violent scenes to further emphasize Richard's overall desire to escape, to leave the world of his childhood behind. Wright structures his narrative very much like the slave narratives, as Butterfield states: "Through knowledge, resistance, and the restless movement that, as in the slave narratives, takes the form of flight to the North, Wright builds an identity out of the atomized solitude of alienation and preserves his integrity and freedom of spirit" (Butterfield 167). While the violent scenes in themselves

have no redeeming value or positive effect on Richard, their artistic representations do allow Wright to emphasize issues of integrity and escape in two ways: On the one hand, many violent scenes underline the impossibility of living in the South and further his determination to move to the North. On the other hand, some of the violent scenes show that writing and creativity are his special ways to escape from the senselessness of Southern trauma.

Bryant studies violence in *Black Boy*, and carefully distinguishes among the various ways in which it functions. He sees the most positive types of violence in the schoolyard fights of Richard, stating that these "fights become a way of defining himself, of establishing who he is and achieving the admiration of his schoolmates. Once he has proven himself in a fight, the other schoolchildren accord him the kind of individual respect that he needs to be whole" (Bryant 206). As opposed to this, the violence at home can be linked to the violence suffered at the hands of the white world, an overpowering violence that he cannot fight against:

Not so the moral system of his grandmother's household and the white world it mirrors. There the moral rules are unequally applied. It is God's will that all members of the family have a sacred right to punish the young Richard when he seeks to go his own way, or that whites are morally authorized to kill blacks when blacks seek to claim equal rights. This system does not authorize either young Richard or blacks in general to fight back. (Bryant 207)

Indeed, Richard experiences the trauma of violence at home and at the hands of whites; and I would like to call attention to two ways in which he deals with this trauma of violence in his book. His inability to predict, escape, or deal with violence shows him the necessity to leave the South altogether, to search a way out of this world. But another kind of escape can be his own artistic development, an artistic self-affirmation that is not

a direct response to or a fight against violence, but is shown to exist and give a meaning to his life in spite of the stifling world of random violence around him.

The nature of violence directed at Richard from the white world is a random violence and a "naked will to power" (Bryant 204). And in this sense, the situation and the violence with the aunt and the grandmother indeed mirror the hopeless power structure of his relationship with the white world. Fighting back and standing up proudly are out of the question here, as his description of the lady who killed several whites at her lynched husband's funeral suggests. Even though the child Richard decides to emulate this lady if he is ever faced with white violence, he knows that such an act would mean his immediate demise: "I resolved that I would emulate the black woman if I were ever faced with a white mob; I would conceal a weapon, pretend that I had been crushed by the wrong done to one of my loved ones; then, just when they thought I had accepted their cruelty as the law of my life, I would let go with my gun and kill as many of them as possible before they killed me" (73-74). Of course, when he is older and does confront white violence, he acts more sensibly, in the way he knows to survive in Jim Crow South. For example, he is beaten by a group of white men who had offered him a drink, and he refused without saying "sir:"

I felt something hard and cold smash me between the eyes. It was an empty whisky bottle. I saw stars, and fell backwards from the speeding car into the dust of the road, my feet became entangled in the steel spokes of the bicycle. ... 'Ain't you learned to say sir to a white man yet?' ... They stood looking at me. I rubbed my shins, trying to stop the flow of blood. No doubt they felt a sort of contemptuous pity, for one asked: 'You wanna ride to town now, nigger? You reckon you know enough to ride now?' 'I wanna walk,' I said simply. (181)

Thus, unlike what he decided to do as a child, he does not fight back. With this example, Richard demonstrates the randomness of violence as well as the impossibility of directly countering it. A seemingly benevolent gesture of being offered a drink, and a seemingly

neutral answer of "no" can incite extreme reactions. A similar example is being stopped and searched at gun-point by the police one night (182).

While Uncle Hoskins and most black people around him internalized defensive modes of behavior and learned to live with this constant danger, "with Richard, the process does not 'take'" (Butterfield 158). Richard Wright could never imagine accepting these conditions and living a life where danger constantly waits for him in his meetings with white people and white culture. The violence could not be resisted or controlled. Understanding that he could never get accustomed to the traditional ways (seemingly happy-go-lucky, Uncle-Tomish behavior) of avoiding the random violence aimed at blacks, Wright decided to leave for the North in the hopes of finding a more peaceful life. Since he could not "laugh and talk like the other" (182) blacks, white people around him noticed his unusually serious behavior. One of his friends even reminded him: "Do you want to get killed? ... You are marked already" (183). Wright's response is: "Then tell me how must I act? ... I just want to make enough money to leave" (184). This desire to leave is carried throughout Part I of *Black Boy*, which ends with his departure for the North: "This was the culture from which I sprang. This was the terror from which I fled" (257). Among other reasons, this is why Butterfield compares *Black Boy* to the slave narratives "not so much [because] Wright has consciously imitated the slave narrative ... but [because] his childhood and adolescence closely resembled the patterns of slavery" (Butterfield 156).

It is in light of this hopeless and all-encompassing violence suffered at the hands of the majority society that we can begin to understand family violence and Richard's reactions to it. The book's famous opening scene shows the four-year-old Richard setting

the house on fire, ostensibly accidentally, and as a result, having to suffer so severe a whipping from his mother's hands that doctors fear for his life:

I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still. I was lost in a fog of fear. ... But for a long time I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to killing me. (7)

This incident, placed strategically at the beginning of the book, serves to emphasize the message that Richard's life is not an average boy's story of growing up, but the story of a *black boy* living in a world of KKK house-burnings and broken families ruined by years of violence and oppression. Bryant studies the symbolism of such descriptions of his feverish state of being as the "monstrous white faces suspended from the ceiling, leering at me" (Wright, *Uncle Tom's* 5) and the "huge wobbly white bags, like the full udders of cows, suspended from the ceiling above me" (Wright, *Black Boy* 7) and states: "The family violence is mixed in his fevered unconscious with the all-pervasive white danger" (Bryant 207).

Immediately after this incident, Wright continues his narrative with one of the only four poetic insertions in the book, termed "catalogues" by Camp. And the point of this first catalogue is to show Richard's developing artistic sensitivity, his self-discovery, that goes along with the discovery of the world: "Each event spoke with a cryptic tongue. And the moments slowly revealed their coded meanings ... There was the faint, cool kiss of sensuality when dew came to my cheeks and shins as I ran down the wet green garden paths in the early morning" (7). Camp points out that the poetic catalogues in *Black Boy* call attention to the importance of art in Wright's life; in particular, this very first one "is a blatant disruption of the prose, and clearly indicates its importance through lyrical lines, dual imagery, and philosophical/emotional content" (Camp 30). The opening scene of

violence and the poetic catalogue immediately attached to it are not related on the level of plot or meaning. But it is exactly their contrast and their proximity that call attention to the significance of art and writing in Richard's life. As we have seen, the only way out of the all-encompassing violence is escape, but this escape can take the form of art and writing as well as flight to the North.

A few pages later, Richard has already been abandoned by his father and begins to experience the hunger that will stay with him throughout his youth. In this scene, not having a man at the house, the mother sends Richard to the store to get some food. On the way, a street-gang beats him up and takes away his money. The mother cruelly sends the young boy out into the streets over and over again to confront the same gang that has beaten him and taken away his money. The implication here is clear: the mother wants to train Richard for a violent world, train him to defend himself and fight back. She tells him, "I'm going to teach you this night to stand up and fight for yourself" (17), and Richard learns the lesson well:

They closed in. In blind fear I let the stick fly, feeling it crack against a boy's skull. I swung again, laming another skull, then another. Realizing that they would retaliate if I let up for but a second, I fought to lay them low, to knock them cold, to kill them so that they could not strike back at me. I flayed with tears in my eyes, teeth clenched, stark fear making me throw every ounce of my strength behind each blow. I hit again and again, dropping the money and the grocery list. The boys scattered, yelling, nursing their heads, staring at me in utter disbelief. They had never seen such frenzy. I stood panting, egging them on, taunting them to come on and fight. When they refused, I ran after them and they tore out for their homes, screaming. The parents of the boys rushed into the streets and threatened me, and for the first time in my life, I shouted at grownups, telling them that I would give them the same if they bothered me. I finally found my grocery list and the money and went to the store. ... That night I won the right to the streets of Memphis. (18)

Unbelievable as this particular incident may sound, this is the cornerstone of the life of Richard, set right at the beginning of the book. In a brutal manner, the mother prepares

him for a world in which fighting is central to existence. While the first scene suggests the overarching violence of his world, penetrating into their very house, this second scene prepares Richard for his later life of fights at school and in the city. But the true significance of this story is only revealed if we consider what those "streets of Memphis" he won the rights to were really like. This is amply described in the following pages: having been forced by his mother to win "the right to the streets," the five-year-old Richard becomes literally a drunkard, during the next few months taking whiskey from men in saloons, going around cursing, and loitering on the streets. The triumphant concluding line of the above passage thus becomes a rather ironic beginning to a life of a boy's senseless alcoholism. Upon finding out about this, his mother's reactions are typical: "My mother was in despair. She beat me, then she prayed and wept over me" (22). Finally, it was decided to keep Richard with an old black woman, until his "craving for alcohol finally left" (22) him. This concludes the part of being an alcoholic boy on the streets of Memphis, but a true solution is suggested by the opening of the next paragraphs: "In the immediate neighborhood there were many school children who, in the afternoons, would stop and play en route to their homes; they would leave their books upon the sidewalk and I would thumb through the pages and question them about the baffling black print" (22). In this way, Wright carefully places his desire to read and write next to the hopeless scenes of violence, suggesting art and writing as the only true means of escape from this situation. So, in both of these instances, we see that violence indicates the problem, but it does not carry with it the solution. Wright over and over again, turns to art as the solution.

In between the two violent scenes initiated by the mother, there is a third violent scene, when Richard kills a cat to spite his father, who said, "Kill that damn thing!" (11). Richard purposefully takes the father's injunctions literally and hangs the cat. Jennifer H. Poulos points out that this act foreshadows the realities of the South:

He enacts the probable fate of a black person who speaks immoderately or incorrectly. The depiction of this incident in a completely African-American context - Richard has yet to encounter white racism - simultaneously expresses anger at the complicity of blacks in silencing themselves and indicts, through the metaphorical lynching, the real obscenity, white oppression. (Poulos 58)

But it must be added that it is Richard who outwits his father in this instance, making cunning use of literal interpretation of language in order to punish his father. While this story does not end any more triumphantly for Richard than the other two, it does establish his "youthful self as a devilish child, capable of doing enormous harm to himself and others through language" (Poulos 59).

Wright thus describes a world saturated with violence. In this way, he attests to the impossibility of living together with the majority culture in the Jim Crow South. He brings up the examples of his friends, who have to humiliate themselves even to survive, and even so, there is never safety in a world of random violence. Through the examples of intra-racial violence in his homes, Wright also shows that the African American home cannot offer a refuge from the effects of racism. The only solution he can think of is to escape, which, in Part I of *Black Boy* is directed towards the North, though this, in turn, is shown to have its own problems in Part II. For Richard Wright, the author, mastering language, developing imagination, and working towards his dream of writing can be another kind of escape, an effort through which he can create some kind of sense out of the senseless trauma offered by his world.

## Violence in Lakatos: Fair and Unfair Encounters

*Smoky Pictures* by Menyhért Lakatos opens with shocking images of violence, simultaneously suggesting the realities of social repression and the importance of self-discovery for the protagonist. The book opens with the stories of Boncza's great-aunt, Mámi, stories about the past, when Gypsies still roamed freely across the borders of Eastern European countries. The first and most important story drives home the fact that these "glorious days" are gone, the freedom of traveling Gypsies is checked by a violently oppressive society. Back in the time of Mámi's youth, her group had met another Gypsy tribe, traveling across an area of present-day Serbia. The tribe they met consisted only of men; the women and children had been killed and the men's ears had been cut off. Mámi relates the unbelievable story told them by the speaker of this tribe:

'We were surrounded by many soldiers,' said the old man. 'Their leader was saying something we did not understand. He was making notions of cutting off our ears, killing the children and women, and letting us go. ... We misunderstood him, believing they would let us all go if we let our ears [get] cut off. So, we allowed our ears to be cut, without a word. As we, bloody and humiliated, were heading back to our camp, we saw the soldiers there, and we were knee-deep in the blood of our own children, women, and horses. The soldiers did not let a single soul to survive, except us, men without ears. This was a sign for all to see what happens to those who dare to go into their territory. (10)<sup>124</sup>

So, the earliest memory of the protagonist revolves around a history of violence. Here, even more pointedly than in *Black Boy*, it is shown that the history of the protagonist's people is a history filled with violence. It shows that the traditional freedom of Gypsies

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<sup>124</sup> "Sok katona vett körül bennünket – mondta az öreg -, mit tehattunk? ... A vezetőjük valamit beszélt, nem értettük. Mutatta, hogy levágja a fülüket, a gyerekeket, az asszonyokat megölik, minket meg elengednek. ... Úgy értettük, ha a fülünket le hagyjuk vágni, elmehetünk. De ha nem, megölik a gyerekeket, asszonyokat. Hát mit tehattunk? Jajszó nélkül túrtuk. Véresen, szégyenkezve indultunk a tábor felé, még ott voltak a katonák, de a gyerekeink, asszonyaink és lovaink vérében térdig gázoltunk. Egy élőlényt sem hagytak meg, csak minket, levágott füllel, hadd lássa mindenki, hogy így jár aki odateszi a lábát" (10).

traveling across various kinds of boundaries has been crushed by the violent realities of the past and present.

But, just as Wright augmented the description of extreme violence in the opening pages of his book with the importance of his artistic self-discovery and self-expression, Lakatos also finishes the violent story of social control with a note on his own self-discovery. It is easy to imagine the young Boncza listening to this horrible story and not even exactly understanding it. In a childish generalization, he asks Mami, "What is the usual reason for cutting people's tongues out?" Perhaps to soothe the boy's fears, Mami responds with a prophetic statement referring to Boncza's self-making and respect through education: "'They will not cut your tongue, boy,' she said, stroking my hair, 'they will love you because you can write and read. When you grow up, everybody will listen to you. Bright people are respected among our folks'" (14).

In a way somewhat similar to *Black Boy*, *Smoky Pictures* is full of violent scenes, taking place in three areas: Lakatos's own family, in his encounters with other Gypsies, and in his encounters with non-Gypsies. The violence among Gypsies is contrasted with the repressive and unequal violence of inter-racial encounters. This contrast Lakatos emphasizes between intra-racial and inter-racial violence serves to call attention to the difficulties of inter-racial encounters. Making fine distinctions between fights among the Roma and fights with members of the majority society, Lakatos shows the tough but fair rules within his own people, as opposed to the unpredictability of affairs with the majority society.

The most important intra-racial fight takes place in the middle of the book, when Boncza has to fight his "wife's" family. It was quite normal that Vorzsa, a young girl,

after having slept with Boncza, was considered his wife (at least for a while) by her entire family. Nevertheless, after Vorzsa's mother tricked Boncza into sleeping with her (the mother), too, the family called for a fight. The colorful description of this fight not only emphasizes its brutality but also calls attention to its fairness. Lakatos claims that the winner of the fight is always right, seemingly describing an arbitrary decision as to what is right and wrong. Yet, it shows the fact that at least the fight can and does settle things; in its tribal format, it is able to create a hero and a new order by which to abide. The fight also develops Boncza's personality. His initial misgivings about beating up his enemy gives way to an understanding of "Romano Kriszi," Gypsy law, that is different from the laws of the land, but is a system of culturally legitimized law nevertheless. His sense of fairness, truth, mercy, and similar notions is seen to evolve through introspections during the fight itself:

While they were crying, begging, or attempting to escape, my only purpose was to hit as hard as possible, without showing any mercy. There wasn't a trace of human pity in me. My initial misgivings upon seeing my friend Bada's huge stick were gone. At times, when I could not make one fall from one blow, I even wished my stick was as large as his. I was convinced that I was doing everything in the name of truth, my truth. The law is the law. And if the wise men of old had decided that truth would abide with the strong, then let it be so.

The weak is never right. They either beat him to death or kill him while being sorry for him. It's all the same.

Few are the joys of him who has to always accept the truth of others. There is nothing more disgusting than truth being spit into one's face. It hurts more than the bloody wounds of split skulls. (278)<sup>125</sup>

The situation was not nearly as tragic as it might have seemed. Zselkó and his family were nursing their wounds, sitting listlessly on the bloody grass. We

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<sup>125</sup> "Amíg jajgattak, könyörögtek vagy menekülni akartak, szájalom nélkül arra törekedtem, hogy minél nagyobbat üssek. Nyoma sem volt bennem emberi könyörületnek. Ki tudja, hová lett az az aggodalom, ami a Bada első karója láttán elfogott. Talán olykor még irigyeltem is a hatalmas dorongját, amikor valamelyiket egy ütéssel nem tudtam leteríteni. Meg voltam győződve arról, hogy mindent az igazságért, a saját igazságomért teszek. A törvény az törvény. És ha már úgy határoztak a bölcs öregek, hogy azé az igazság, aki erősebb, akkor isten neki fakeszt. A gyengének soha nincs igaza. Vagy agyonverik, vagy megölik a sajnálkozással. Egykutya. Akinek mindég a mások igazságát kell elfogadni, annak nagyon kevés az örömnépe. Nincs undorítóbb az igazságnál, amikor beleköpik az ember arcába, jobban fáj a fölrepedezett koponyák vérkocsonyás sebeinél" (278).

might have hit a little harder than necessary at times, but it was not with the intention to kill. I was feeling sorry for them again, even though I knew these skulls were used to being tapped once in a while. And while this may not have been the best mode of blood-cleansing, it is at least as good as applying leeches. (279)<sup>126</sup>

As opposed to this violent, senseless, but also fair, true, and personality-building fighting with the other Gypsies, Boncza's encounter with one of his most antagonistic gadjo schoolmates, Tarhosi, symbolizes the social repression and inequality, much like Wright's avoidance of openly fighting back the white boys who beat him. Boncza sees that his situation is hopeless, as he is forced into an open confrontation which he has been trying avoid for a long time. He acts impulsively, but also wisely, getting away with the unthinkable. The scene shows that he stands no chance against the group of gadjo classmates, just as he has no chance against the repression of society. His mind is working hard, and he does the best he can, but the chase that ensues underlies the message that, unlike the fight with other Gypsies, this fight does not settle things once and for all:

There was a silent movement in the large schoolroom. The groups of students previously divided, now stepped closer to each other. This well-organized strategy of war made their intention clear to me. There was no opportunity of any extended argument or defense on my part. My fellow students were strongly holding on to their burnt-down torches, almost crushing them with their strong grips. I would be a liar if I said that my mood was high and happy. My mind was working like never before...

'Didn't you understand what I said?' – he asked me, gritting his teeth and shoving the roll of paper under my nose. I saw little red circles in front of my eyes, and at that point I stopped thinking, and was overwhelmed by blind passion. I snatched the roll from Tarhosi's hand and threw it among the watchful students, as if I was throwing a quarry at the hunters. I felt the stiffness of my fingers as I twisted the collars of his coat around his neck. Then I told him exactly what I

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<sup>126</sup> "A helyzet korántsem volt olyan tragikus, ahogy azt a látszat mutatta. A letiport, véres fűvön Zselkóék egyhangú szomorúsággal tapogatták érzékennyé vált pontjaikat. Jóllehet, olykor a szükségesnél is magasabba emeltük botjainkat, de becsületünkre váljék, nem gyilkos szándékkal. Ismét elfogott a szánakozás, függetlenül attól a tudattól, hogy ezek a koponyák hozzászoktak az időnkénti csapoláshoz, és ha a vérváltásnak nem is a legjobb módját választottuk, de ér annyit, mint egy piócaragasztás" (279).

thought he was before I let him go with a huge blow to his nose. ... Then without any obstacle – I only had to watch my balance – I walked out. (375-376)<sup>127</sup>

Even though I had a good sense of what was going on, I wanted to make sure what the sheriffs were up to. ... It did not take long before I found out. I saw Tarhosi among them, with a white bandage on his head. (382)<sup>128</sup>

The contrast between the above two fights amply demonstrates that while life was tough for Boncza both among the Gypsies and among gadjos, he had a chance of truth and equality in the intra-racial encounter, but no chance of fair play in the inter-racial affair. Similarly to Richard's mother, Boncza's parents also resort to violent acts, as a way to prepare him for a violent life. In a scene that has elements of both Richard's mother's beatings and her sending the boy down to the streets to meet the gangs, Boncza's father sends his son to the police for a good and thorough beating. The story begins when the young boy is given the task of taking care of his father's horse, his family's greatest treasure. His initial dislike of horses soon turns into enthusiasm, suggesting his enculturation into his family's life. His enthusiasm soars so high that he steals some alfalfa for the horse at night. His "aunt" Mámi warns him that "your father will kill you if he finds out" (17)<sup>129</sup>, but in fact his father does even worse: he makes Boncza go to the police to report on himself. There, he gets a severe beating on the tips of his fingers:

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<sup>127</sup> "Halk mozgolódás támadt a teremben, az előbb kettévált diákcsoport hosszú sorai közelebb léptek egymáshoz. A jól megszervezett hadmozdulat tisztán, világosan megmutatta szándékukat. Hosszadalmasabb vitára vagy könyörgésre semmi lehetőség nem kínálkozott, azt hiszem, nem is vált volna előnyömré. Diáktársaim úgy szorongatták a leégett fáklyarudakat, hogy majd kettéroppann a kezükben. Hazudnám, ha azzal dicsekednék, hogy valami vidám füttyölős hangulatom támadt. Dolgozott az agyam, mint még soha. ... 'Talán nem értetted mit mondtam?' – kérdezte fogvicsorgatva, és a papírtekercest ismét az orrom felé emelte. Apró piros karikák tódultak a szemem elé, és ebben a pillanatban megszűntem gondolkodni, a vak indulat kerített hatalmába. Kiragadtam a hadonászó Tarhosi kezéből a tekercest, mint valami koncot, a feszülten várakozó diákok közé dobtam, mint isten a vargát, éreztem, hogy megsibbadnak ujjaim, ahogy nyaka köré csavartam a zsinóros kabát gallérját. Még néhány keresett és keresetlen szóval tudtára adtam kilétét, aztán jókora ökölcsapást mérve az orrára, útjára bocsátottam. ... Én már akadály nélkül – csupán az egyensúlyomra kellett vigyáznom - kísétáltam" (375-376).

<sup>128</sup> "Függetlenül a velem született előérzettől, meg kellett győződnöm a csendőrök szándékáról. ... Nem kellett sokáig várakoznom, rövidesen bizonyosságot szerezhettem. Tarhosi ott nyüzsgött a batyus, táskás nép között, fején megtévesztő fehér kötéssel" (382).

<sup>129</sup> "Megöl apád, ha megtudja" (17).

The first blow hurt a lot. The second one did, too. I did not feel a thing at the third blow, though he was pounding at my bare bones. The blood trickling down through my fingers gathered into little streams on the floor. I withdrew my hand after each blow only to stretch it out again for him to hit. 'Hold out your other hand,' he was yelling at me. I did not count the number of blows I received, and I assume neither did he. ... I could not sleep all night long. I kept my hands in pots full of water, but I still had visions of the devil dancing in front of my eyes. My wounds got soaked and infected by the morning. We had to go to the doctor. (20-21)<sup>130</sup>

In a sense, we can see the indirect violence of the father directed against Boncza. But he does so in order to teach him a lesson about what kind of a person he must become: unlike Gypsies of past generations, Boncza is taught not to steal but to take responsibility for his actions. Moreover, he is made to experience police brutality that is obviously disproportionate to the petty theft he committed. He will encounter unjust police brutality and other random kinds of violence from the non-Gypsy society. As we will see below, the next time the police pursue him, he knows that the best he can do is to escape, like Wright did from the South.

It is clear that the violent opening scenes of *Smoky Pictures* establish the fact of living in a dangerous and violent world, a violence that reaches into the depths of the personal life and personal relationships of the young protagonist. His artistic self-making will be developed against the backdrop of this violence. The violence among Gypsies, bloody though it may be, is controlled by "Romano Kriszi," Gypsy law, and thus contributes to the Boncza's development of strength, bravery, and fairness. The violence of the outside world, coming from schoolmates and the police, shows an overarching power over him that cannot be confronted directly, but only by cunning evasion or escape

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<sup>130</sup> "Az első ütés nagyon fáj, a második is, a harmadiknál már nem éreztem semmit, pedig a csontok végeit püfölte. Az ujjaim között végigfolyó vér apró pontokban fröccsent a padlóra, sziszegve kaptam hátra minden ütés után, aztán visszanyújtottam. 'Tartsd a másikat!' ordította. Nem számoltam mennyit adott, azt hiszem, ő sem. ... Egész éjjel nem tudtam aludni, két kezemet a mellettem levő fazekakban tartottam, de minden percben ördögök táncoltak előttem. Reggelre gombásra áztak a sebeim, be kellett menni az orvoshoz" (10-11).

into a – hopefully – better world. And the violence of the parental home prepares Boncza for both.

### **Violence in Hurston: Looking at Both Sides of Racial Attitudes**

Zora Neale Hurston, in her *Dust Tracks on a Road*, does not present such a dangerous and violent world as do Wright and Lakatos in their narratives. Her main point is that in the "all Negro" town of Eatonville, she was free of the violence and racial strife felt and described by Wright. Nevertheless, there are a few very important instances of violence, showing that Hurston was aware of the realities of social repression and of the role of violence in her society. Her few descriptions of violence, be they within the family, among African Americans, or in inter-racial settings call the reader's attention to the realities of inter-racial encounters and their effects on Zora's everyday life.

A family scene right at the beginning of the book establishes these points. A conversation between her mother and father about how to behave points out the dangers of the outside world:

Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to 'jump at de sun.' We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground. Papa did not feel so hopeful. Let well enough alone. It did not do for Negroes to have too much spirit. He was always threatening to break mine or kill me in the attempt. My mother was always standing between us. He conceded that I was impudent and given to talking back, but she didn't want to 'squinch my spirit' too much for fear that I would turn out to be a mealy-mouthed rag doll by the time I got grown. Papa always flew hot when Mama said that. I do not know whether he feared for my future, with the tendency I had to stand and give battle, or that he felt a personal reference in Mama's observation. He predicted dire things for me. The white folks were not going to stand for it. I was going to be hung before I got grown. Somebody was going to blow me down for my sassy tongue. Mama was going to suck sorrow for not beating my temper out of me before it was too late. Posses with ropes and guns were going to drag me out sooner or later on account of that stiff neck I toted. I was going to tote a hungry belly by reason of my forward ways. (13-14)

On the one hand, this passage establishes the otherwise suppressed racial strife; as the father says: "It did not do for Negroes to have too much spirit" (13). On the other hand, the same scene is about Zora's own personal development, her self-making. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese makes the former point: "Hurston's discussion of her parents laces the star-falling magic of Eatonville with unmistakable traces of the harsh realities of black Southern life" (Fox-Genovese 223). Will Brantley studies the latter point, the personal development of Zora presented in this passage, but allowing for the fact that Hurston uses the example to mention the otherwise suppressed racial dangers. He stresses the "philosophical" difference between the mother and the father in this scene, noting that Zora's self-development will follow the mother more closely:

Hurston acknowledges that part of her father's fear was racially motivated but that the difference between his reticence and her mother's defiance and ability to dare stemmed from a larger philosophical difference – one that she captures in a single metaphor: 'Rome, the eternal city, meant two different things to my parents. To Mama, it meant, you must build it today so it could last through eternity. To Papa, it meant that you could plan to lay some bricks today and you have the rest of eternity to finish it' (92). ... Hurston resolves her conflict by rejecting the father's values – no matter how grounded in the social realities of the time – and aligning herself with those of her mother. (Brantley 193)

But this early passage on violence is not simply a discussion of a violent world and some philosophies of personal development. It is also Zora's first hands-on experience of violence itself in the form of a family quarrel. While the father "flew hot," Zora took refuge behind her mother's chair: "Behind Mama's rocking chair was a good place to be in times like that. Papa was not going to hit Mama. He was two hundred pounds of bone and muscle and Mama weighed somewhere in the nineties. When people teased him about Mama being the boss, he would say he could break her of her headstrong ways if he wanted to, but she was so little that he couldn't find any place to hit her" (14).

Thus, in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, where violence does not play as important a role as in *Black Boy*, we do have instances of violence at home, among blacks, and in the repressive society as well. Zora's fights with other children in the village establish her headstrong personality and her position among her peers. The advice of her friend is to the point:

Now, Snidlits, this calls for talking. Don't you try to fight three kids at one time unless you just can't get around it. Do the best you can, if you have to. But learn right now, not to let your head start more than your behind can stand. Measure out the amount of fighting you can do, and then do it. When you take on too much and get licked, folks will pity you first and scorn you after awhile, and that's bad. Use your head! (31)

This is important advice, as Hurston develops herself into an educated ethnographer, going "into the fields" to collect folklore. At times, she makes use of her fighting skills, her skills to "do the best she can," and her skills to "jump at the sun." One such instance is described in her autobiography, as she was collecting folklore in Polk County. She made friends with the most important lady in the town: "Right away, I decided that Big Sweet was going to be my friend. From what I had seen and heard in the short time I had been there, I felt as timid as an egg without a shell" (154). So, her cunning in choosing a friend for herself proves essential in avoiding violence that might have cost her life: "She warned me that Lucy might try to 'steal' me. That is, ambush me, or otherwise attack me without warning. So I was careful. I went nowhere on foot without Big Sweet" (155).

But her father's warnings about inter-racial violence were not without reason either. At least, his predictions of poverty came true: we know from Hurston's biography that she was hungry much of her life and died a pauper. Nevertheless, she chooses not to emphasize white violence; rather, she chooses to include a very peculiar incident of inter-racial violence. Rather than warning of white danger, Hurston decides to talk about her

people even in this story. Even though the black people in the following story may not be sympathetic, the story itself denounces racial divisions and shows what racial stereotypes can do to people, more than conventional descriptions of social violence. In the chapter entitled "My People, My People!" she describes a childhood experience when all the men from Eatonville, the black village she portrays as a racial haven, go out to defend a black man purported to have been beaten by a white employer: "'It's Jim Watson. Us got to go git him!' and the dozen or more men armed with double-barreled shotguns, breech-loaders, pistols and Papa's repeating Winchester hurried off on their grim mission. Perhaps not a single one of them expected to return alive" (186). A few hours later, however, the men did come back, all laughing and grinning in high spirits. It turned out that the beaten man was not a black, but a white person. "The men who spoke of members of their race as monkeys had gone out to die for one" (188), but when they saw that it was a white man "tied down on his all-fours, and de men was taking turns wid dat bull whip" (188), the black villagers came back laughing and even mocking the white sufferer. Although the black people of the village are not the ones doing the whipping, their happiness over a white man's being whipped is almost a reversal of traditional whipping scenes. This theme is further emphasized by Hurston's passages about how black Africans served and made possible the slave trade. Of course, her point is not to denounce her race, but rather to show the dehumanizing effects of racial divisions, and to move the issue towards questions of individual responsibilities.

Thus, we can see that even though there is much less violence in *Dust Tracks on a Road* than in the other two books discussed so far, its scenes of violence do point both to Hurston's views of social realities as well as the personal development her life will take.

The young Zora's fights develop her personality, while violence and the threat of violence between blacks and whites urge her to develop her own attitude towards race issues. She does not consider escaping into a better world. Rather, she emphasizes the personal aspects of violent encounters, strengthening her argument that individual responsibility is always more important than racial expectations.

### **Violence in Péliné: Attempts to Break Down Racial Boundaries**

Péliné's *My Little Life* opens with descriptions of two people whom the protagonist, Hilda, used to be afraid of as a child. Neither of these people is ever mentioned again in the book; their presence on the first two pages, however, speaks clearly about both the dangers of the world and the importance of the heroine's personal development. The world of Hilda is the multi-ethnic environment of Budapest, a house where "all kinds of people lived. There were peasants, Gypsies, Jews, but we were all in the greatest harmony" (7).<sup>131</sup> Unlike Hurston, Péliné describes a multi-ethnic environment, but like Hurston, Péliné primarily emphasizes racial harmony and peace. Nevertheless, the difficulties of poverty and racial strife are described in her book and exemplified by the imagined dangers described on the opening pages. But the ironic descriptions of these irrational fears also indicate the attitude she will take towards her own self-development. Throughout the book, Hilda's "little life," her fallible smallness is emphasized. Her self will be built up out of the image of smallness, with an emphasis on instinctive honesty. Unlike Hurston, Wright, and Lakatos, she does not emphasize her artistic or educational aspirations; nevertheless, the book's opening focus on Hilda's

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<sup>131</sup> "Nagyon szedett-vedett emberek laktak. Lakott ott paraszt, cigány, zsidó, de azért a legnagyobb megértésben voltunk" (7).

imagination calls attention to her creative self, points out the fearsomeness of her multi-ethnic environment, and introduces her point of harmony among races. Her own image of smallness and innocence will serve in her book as a link among the races. Without denying the existence of racial difficulties, Hilda herself will attempt to bridge these difficulties and become a connection among races. She calls attention to the irrationality of fear, whether it is of a "three-meter-tall" man or of more serious social confrontations.

Hilda's two fearsome men are described on the opening pages as follows:

There are people I remember better from my five-year-old time than whatever happened yesterday. There was a Swabian peasant, named Urban. He was a frightful giant. He must have been about three meters tall. He had such huge, wrinkled, dangerous, thick-soled black boots that when his heels were still on the edge of the sidewalk, the noses of his boots were already in the middle of the street. When he started towards us, he was like a huge ship, swinging himself. .... There was another strange figure, called Radamér. He was a slightly built, drunken good-for-nothing. He was constantly drunk, swore loudly, and wanted to fight all the time. He was a very ugly, red gadjo, with his moustache hanging down on both sides like two tails of two cats... The other people in the house were very nice, except there was great poverty. (7-8)<sup>132</sup>

Irrational and childish though these fears may sound, Péliné emphasizes the fearsomeness of living in a multiethnic city, particularly if one is a young member of an oppressed minority. On the other hand, if Urban and Radamér were the greatest dangers in the life of Hilda, then the suggestion is that her life was quite safe after all. And it is this duality concerning living in multiethnic Budapest that best characterizes Péliné's descriptions throughout. Race relations in general posed no danger to her life, but there would emerge

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<sup>132</sup> "Vannak személyek, akikre jobban emlékszem, mint ami tegnap történt, pedig akkor még csak ötéves voltam. Volt egy Urbán nevezetű sváb paraszt. Az egy félelmetes óriás volt. Lehetett úgy három méter. Akkora nagy francos fekete, gyűrött vastag talpú veszedelmes csizmája volt, hogy még a sarka a járda szélén volt, de a csizma orra már az út közepére ért. Mikor megindult felénk, olyan volt, mint egy óriási hajóhinta, csak úgy lebegtette magát. A bajusza meg, mintha egy portfis lett volna a nagy mocskos orra alá ragasztva. ... Na, még egy figura volt, azt meg Radamérnek hívták. Az meg egy satnya részeges kókler volt. Folyton részegen tántorgott, káromkodott, meg verekedni akarat. Igen csúnya, vörös gádzsó volt, a bajusza kétoldalt úgy lógott, mint két francos macskafarok... A többi lakók nagyon rendesek voltak, csak igen nagy volt a csóróság" (7-8).

some extreme person or situation over and over again to remind one of the tenuousness of racial harmony.

A few pages later, the descriptions of another set of Hilda's childish fears show the tenuous situation of their family in society. The fear of prisons indicates her childish understanding that the freedom of her family is uncertain at best, foreshadowing their precarious financial and social position as experienced throughout her childhood. It also foreshadows the years her family will have to spend at "Augusztá enclosure," a ghetto where the poorest of the poor live at the edge of the city, the periphery of society:

We [children of the family] were very much afraid of prisons, of being locked up. Mother talked about these things a lot because there were a few people in our house who had been to jail. Both sons of the lady next door were in jail, even though the parents were very nice. Both boys had been roof carpenters. They had no work, so they stole something, and that is how they ended up in jail. The entire house empathized with the parents, they did not look down on them. Whenever the parents were allowed to visit the jail, people in the house gave them cigarettes and cleaning utensils to take with them. (11)<sup>133</sup>

Violence within the family is rampant, but it does not shake Hilda's personal feeling of safety. The examples of two instances of violence within the family show that they also serve a dual role in the book: on the one hand, family violence reflects the hopeless social realities in which they live; on the other hand, it contributes to the development of the child, her formation of her own self in the likeness of her mother, whose practicality and strong personality create possibilities for the family. The first example concerns a photograph of the father as a soldier, which calls attention to their hopeless political and social background. The second example is a story about a picture

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<sup>133</sup> "[A] börtöntől, a lecsukástól nagyon féltünk. Anyám sokat mesélt ilyenekről, mert abban a házban bizony voltak egy páran, akik megjárták a börtönt. A szomszédnak mind a két fia börtönben volt, pedig nagyon rendes szülei voltak. Tetőfedő volt mind a két fiú. Munkájuk nem volt, valamit loptak, amiért börtönbe kerültek. Az egész ház együttérzett a szülőkkel, nem vetették meg és nem közöcsítették ki őket, sőt amikor lehetett csomagot bevinni a börtönbe, akkor a ház lakói is adtak cigarettát meg tisztasági szert" (11).

of the Virgin Mary that emphasizes the strength gained from culture, the mother's practicality, and Hilda's creative self-development in following her mother.

In the first story, there is a picture of the father as a soldier. He cherishes this picture from his youth, but the mother lets the children play with it, and practically ruin it in the process. This shows that this traditional "manly" role of being a soldier and serving the country is irrelevant in the current situation. In fact, the very presence of the photo in the house can mean danger, as the father used to serve a political system that has since been overthrown. The family cannot depend on the father's role:

He had a photo, in which he was wearing a soldier's uniform, a soldier's hat on his head, and a daisy<sup>134</sup> in the hat. My mother gave us this photograph, and we were playing with it, throwing it around, and stepping on it. My father was yelling at my mother, 'Zsuzsi Fejes, your head is as big as a barrel, and there is no brain in it at all. You give my picture to the kids to play with.' 'Lajos Fejes, what's the use of this picture. Do you want to get us all in jail? ... Your military service has served us well! You came home with tuberculosis, you are practically a cripple, that is enough souvenir for us. You screwed me with all these children, and I have to have the strength to raise your monkeys, for I can't count on you.' (11)<sup>135</sup>

A few pages later, in another instance of family violence, the father destroys a large picture of the Virgin Mary. This picture is something of a cultural icon for the Gypsy family, and Péliné uses the story to call attention to the importance of culture and the bonding among families in the house. Moreover, the immediate reason for the father's anger is the mother's application for governmental aid, a humiliating but useful way of making ends meet. So, this instance of violence in the family establishes the harsh social

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<sup>134</sup> "michaelmas daisy" = "Őszirózsa" – a reference to the fact that the photo might have been taken under the service of a different political regime, thus, it could be dangerous to have it in the house.

<sup>135</sup> "Volt néki egy fotója, amin katonaruhában van, és katonasapka van a fején, és a sapkán egy őszirózsa. Anyám adta oda ezt a fényképet, és azzal játszottunk, ide-oda dobáltuk, tapostuk, apám meg veszekedett anyámmal: 'Fejes Zsuzsi, akkora a fejed, mint egy hordó, eszed meg egy csöpp sincs. Odaadod a gyerekeidnek a fényképet, hogy tapossák?' 'Fejes Lajos, minek nekünk ez a kép? Le akarsz csukatni minket? ... Na sokra mentünk a katonaságoddal! Hazajöttél tüdővésszel, hadirokkant lettél, elég emlék maradt nekünk. Rámkúrtad a sok gyereket, csak nekem legyen elég erőm, hogy felneveljem a majmaidat, mert rád nem számíthatok'" (11).

circumstances, the practical way of dealing with these social realities, and the importance of culture and tradition in their lives:

My father hated the people from the office [who came to decide on their applications for financial help]. ... and shouted, 'Get out of here, you sons of bitches! Don't you come peering into my poverty.' ... [My mother said,] 'I am so sorry, dear sir, you see how crazy this Gypsy husband of mine is. But please, just go ahead and send us the aid!' ...

My father, fast as lightning, took the holy picture off the wall, ran out to the balcony, and threw it down to the ground. He yelled, 'Here, Zsuzsa, is your Virgin Mary. Let her help us now. I threw it down, so you don't have it.' My mother could not respond, because she had fainted. When the picture was thrown down it made such a noise that the other families in the house all came out to see what had happened. It was a huge picture, the likes of which can still be seen in Roma families. It was a portrait of the Virgin Mary, with her hands placed together in prayer. It must have been one meter high and eighty centimeters wide, and it had a glass covering. It made such a noise when my father threw it down, no wonder that my mother fainted. My bigger brothers and sisters were quiet, we small ones wetted our pants, and the people came rushing in. (30-31)<sup>136</sup>

The contrast between these two passages shows that the father's world of strength does not work any more. But it also shows the practicality of the mother, who understands the dangers of belonging to the military of a former regime, and thus destroys the photo. In the current situation, the mother applies for the humiliating aid, putting aside her own feelings of shame. The picture of the Virgin Mary is not a particularly religious symbol, but, with its special size and colors, an image of Gypsy culture (the mother will replace it with a "beautiful bearded Jesus"). It is a sign that the mother sees more clearly what are the important values to be held on to from the past.

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<sup>136</sup> "Apám nagyon utálta az előljárósági embereket. ... 'Takarodjatok ki, az anyátok paraszt szentségét! Az én szegénységemben ne turkáljatok!' Anyám ... mondogatta nekik, 'Ne haragudjon, drága uram, de lássa, ilyen idegbeteg ez a cigány, de azért tessék csak nekem elküldeni a segélyt!' Erre apám, mint a villám, lekapta a falról a nagy szentképet, kiszaladt csak úgy gatyában a gangra, levágta az emeletről, és közben kiabálta: 'No itt van, Zsuzsa, a Szűz Máriád, most már segíthet! Lebasztam, hogy ez se legyen.' Anyám már szólni se tudott, mert elájult, akkora robajjal zuhant le a kép, hogy az egész ház kirohant, azt hitték, a ház dőlt össze. Ez egy nagy kép volt, még most is látni ilyet a romáknál. A Szűz Máriát ábrázolta, összetett kezekkel. Talán egy méterszer nyolcvan centis volt, és üveg is volt rajta. Hát ez akkorát durrant, nem csodálom, hogy anyám elájult. A nagyobb testvéreim megnémultak mi kicsik a félelemtől bepisiltünk, a lakók rohantak be anyámhoz, hogy fölmosassák" (31).

She discards the father's image of political and military service to the country, but she holds on to an icon of Gypsy culture even in the midst of multi-ethnic poverty.

In spite of the emphasis on harmonious race relations, there are some very important inter-racial instances of violence. Hilda's first week in school is marred by being verbally abused for her race, to which she responds by fighting. The family, knowing the dangers involved in such encounters, is divided in their judgment of the event:

'Mother, your peasant girl really screwed herself. She passed judgment and started a fight in street. She screwed that stupid girl, she threw her on the ground.' Hearing this, my father jumped out of bed and cried, 'Holy Mary, a girl must not do such a thing.' My father turned his attention to me, 'Why did you fight, daughter?' 'Because they called me a stinking Gypsy.' My father was relieved. 'In that case, you did right. You are right. Don't ever let that happen to you. Zsuzsi, didn't I tell you that this our girl is a smart one? You will see, she cannot be screwed over, she has self-respect.' But my mother was angry, 'You just talk, Lajos, this only brings us trouble.' (94)<sup>137</sup>

This instance of violence points out Péliné's attitude towards race issues in the entire book. This battle is won by Hilda, as the teacher takes her side the next day and forbids any kind of racial slur in school. Hilda's personality has developed in her defense of herself, and she was able to conclude: "I was flying to my seat, I was so happy. I was not disappointed. There is justice after all. I made peace with all the girls, and they did not call me Gypsy any more" (95).<sup>138</sup> She thus describes herself as one who has fought not

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<sup>137</sup> "Na, anyám, jól kikúrt magával a paraszt lányod. Ítéletet tett az utcán, verekedett. Jól elmárázta a prostró csajt, úgy odavágta a földhöz, csak úgy nyekkent!" Erre apám is kiugrott az ágyból, anyám meg összecsapta a kezét. 'Fájdalmas Szűz Mária! Hát ilyet nem szabad csinálni egy kislánynak!' Apám nagy érdeklődéssel fordult hozzám: 'Miért verekedtél, leányom?' 'Mert megint lebüdöscigányoztak.' Apám megnyugodva visszaült az ágyra. 'No, akkor jól tetted. Igazad is van, és ne is hagyd magad. Zsuzsi, mondtam neked, hogy okos ez a lány. Majd meglátod, ezt nem lehet csak úgy falhoz állítani, ebben van önérzet.' De anyám méregbe jött: 'Csak biztogasd Lajos, most már ezzel is kezdődik a baj'" (94).

<sup>138</sup> "Szinte repültem a padomhoz a boldogságtól. Nem csalódtam. Mégis van igazság! Meg is békültem a lányokkal, nem cigányoztak többet" (95).

just for herself, but for all races ("There is no Gypsy, no Jew, no Hungarian, here" (95)<sup>139</sup> concludes the teacher), and made herself an instrument of peace and friendship among the girls. Thus, this battle is a step towards her self-development, directed towards establishing connections among races and people throughout the book. However, the "war" for racial acceptance in the school is lost. The following year, with a different teacher, a similar situation forces Hilda out of school for good (115-116). Ironically, among the four authors, Péliné is the one who writes the least about racial repression, even though she is the only one unable to get an education because of racial discrimination. Thus, besides looking at her celebration of self-development in a multi-ethnic world, it is also necessary to notice the overarching presence of repression and discrimination hiding between the lines of her narrative.

## Conclusion

Violence occurs in each of the four books discussed, although its role and extent varies greatly. Because of the emotional charge of violent scenes, all authors open their narratives with scenes of violence that direct the reader's attention to an important message about the complex and complicated race relations presented in the books. Wright describes a world saturated with racial violence, and he chooses to open his narrative with a scene in which the child Richard almost burns the family's house down and is severely beaten for it by his mother. While we do not directly see white people in this scene, the rich symbolism evokes a world of the KKK, random violence, and constant danger. The mother's extreme reaction shows that the violence of the world

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<sup>139</sup> "Itt nincs se cigány, se zsidó, se magyar" (95).

affects even the deepest recesses of the minority characters' personal lives. As these themes are developed in the book, Richard realizes that the only possible response to this world is to escape from it. But just as the child Richard could hide only under the burning house itself, *Black Boy* shows the impossibility of escaping racial strife in Wright's society. Lakatos opens his narrative with a terrible description of a wandering Gypsy tribe whose female members have been killed and the ears of the male members have been cut off. This story from the past is not in harmony with the present of the rest of the narrative. Nevertheless, it calls attention to the traumatic background of his people's current life, the violence of broken traditions, and the uncertainty of social conditions. It also directs Boncza's attention to the importance of living cleverly: of understanding both minority traditions and majority society's rules in order to live according to his own rules. Like Wright, Hurston opens her book with a scene of family violence, but her message is very different. She describes an argument between her parents concerning the dangers of the world. With this scene, Hurston calls attention to the fact that the idealized world of her childhood must be understood in the context of a more negative racial environment. Besides, her own position in the argument between her parents underlines her unusually adventurous and daring personality that she will develop into being a famous autoethnographer. Péliné opens her book with descriptions of frightening characters who are in fact harmless. This serves to establish her position of celebrating the multi-ethnic environment of her childhood. While she does describe racial conflicts and social dangers in her narrative, the overall racial message she tries to convey is the need to eliminate irrational fear and advance mutual trust. In each case, thus, violent scenes call attention

to the extent of racial oppression as perceived by the narrators, as well as to possible ways of dealing with these social situations.

## ***Chapter 4. Repression and Resistance***

### **Background and Terminology: Some Notes on Foucault and de Certeau**

In Chapter 3, I studied some instances of violent encounters in each book, calling attention to the problematic inter-racial relationships as well as various responses to these. In Chapter 4, I will look at the less visible forms of these troublesome relationships as they are embedded in the complex social structures in which the protagonists grow up. Equipped with the insights gained from studying the more spectacular scenes involving violence, I will here compare and contrast the various accounts of how the African American and Hungarian Roma protagonists try to find their rightful places in oppressive racial environments. In light of my discussions in the Introduction about Southern society in America and Gypsy life in Hungary, I believe that the terminology and theories of Michel Foucault as presented in *Discipline and Punish* about the "disciplinary society" can help in understanding the structures of the societies and various modes of behavior described in the books of my study. As a further insight, I will use Michel de Certeau's ideas to shed light on the practices of resistance that the four protagonists utilize. In this introductory section, I briefly review a few of Foucault's and de Certeau's ideas and formulations that are directly relevant to understanding situations in the narratives of my study.

In his famous essay "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," Richard Wright notes of the South: "It was no longer brutally cruel, but subtly cruel. Here I learned to lie, to steal, to dissemble. I learned to play that dual role which every Negro must play if he wants to eat and live" (Wright, *Uncle Tom's* 13). Wright here refers to the covert and subtle modes

of discipline in the Jim Crow South, where violence was "the instrument on reserve" (Walker, Melissa 96), life had to be a "carefully choreographed affair" (Coclanis and Simon 203), and "modes of formal behavior" meant life or death (Ritterhouse 36). Such accounts warrant making use of some theories by Foucault. Andrew Warnes makes several direct connections between Foucault's descriptions of the "Great Confinement" and Wright's descriptions of his life in *Black Boy*. And responses to this situation can be better understood by the help of de Certeau's ideas on tactics. Brian Norman and Piper Kendrix Williams point out: "Wright specifies not only what it means to be a colored citizen under Jim Crow, but also the tactics, ingenuity, and acrobatics required by the aesthetic project of representing segregation" (Norman and Williams 5). I will study forms of subtle cruelty and disciplinary control, as well as tactics of dual role and ingenuity, not only in *Black Boy* but also in the works of Hurston, Lakatos, and Péliné.

Foucault describes how public torture of the eighteenth century gave way to a new, disciplinary society, where people were controlled not by spectacles of frightening open torture, but rather by disciplines:

But in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the disciplines became general formulas of domination. They were different from slavery because they were not based on a relation of appropriation of bodies; indeed, the elegance of the discipline lay in the fact that it could dispense with this costly and violent relation by obtaining effects of utility at least as great. (Foucault 137)

Disciplinary mechanisms were designed to assign people to their appropriate and useful, but at the same time also controllable, spaces. Foucault studies the power structures of various institutions, such as schools, hospitals, the military, and asylums—all serving to create compartments where people could be controlled, but also given opportunities. Such controlled spaces in Wright's book are the orphanage, the schools, the shops, and his workplaces. Warnes explains about the orphanage scene that the "interest in the

treatment of the socially marginal by the socially authoritative extends, in [*Black Boy*] *American Hunger* and *Discipline and Punish* alike, to the institutional segregation. ... [And] such temporal and spatial segregation increases institutional authorities' ability to withhold and to grant, to mete out punishments and to dole out rewards" (Warnes 96). In Lakatos's book, we see the control of the Gypsy population through the institution of organized agricultural work, the disciplinary role of doctors, and the coercive behavior of various government officials. Boncza's experiences at school provide a detailed example of another institution's control over his life. Hurston does not emphasize such institutional controls over her life, though there are some hints of the coercive regulations at some of her schools and workplaces. The unexpected behavior of some of her white employers suggests her being exposed to the irrational whims of members of the oppressing class. Péliné's narrative also reveals that she and her sisters had major problems accepting the control the school required for the opportunities it offered. She also writes about the institutional power of government agencies providing aid to the poor.

Foucault explains that various divisions within the city, such as the "quarters and cantons" (212) introduced by the Paris charity organizations, also served to extend the disciplinary control over people's lives. Divisions among racial and social lines in the cities and neighborhoods that form the settings of the narratives under study are all very important. Black and white neighborhoods and towns are sharply divided both in Wright's and Hurston's books. Wright mentions the dangers of crossing these invisible lines, while Hurston celebrates the isolation of the all-black town of Eatonville. But the fact that Eatonville's racial harmony is based on its being an all-black town suggests the less ideal situations at other places. In Lakatos's book, all Gypsies live in enclosures or

ghettos. Some of Boncza's experiences outside of these enclosures—such as racial incidents on the train and in the city—recall practices of segregation in the Jim Crow South. In Péliné's book, it is very significant that there are distinct Gypsy and gadjo squares, cafés, and buildings in the city. These are not openly marked or enforced, but Hilda's controversial decisions to often ignore these invisible lines point to their marked presence and importance.

The prime example of the functioning of the disciplinary society is the nineteenth-century panopticon, a prison system designed by Jeremy Bentham. In the panopticon, the primary unit is the cell; each prisoner has a well-lit and isolated cell. The impenetrable walls between cells and the impossibility of communication among the prisoners are just as important as the windows to the inside and outside, which provide backlighting for the warden in the center to see "the small captive shadows" (Foucault 200) through each cell. In a disciplinary society, Foucault argues, the same localization and isolation of individuals exist to maintain panoptic control. The major point of the panopticon is that each individual knows he *can* be observed at any time, thus he must always act as if he *was* actually observed. In reality nobody can be observed all the time: "Hence the major effect of the panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 201). This notion possible visibility at all times is also present in all four narratives, along with "the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life" (Foucault 198). For example, Wright describes being searched by the police at gun-point just because of riding his bicycle in a white neighborhood after dark. Lakatos recounts frequent but random police surveillance both at Gypsy Paris and in the city of his school. Hurston's

example of a black-owned barbershop catering only to whites is another example of this "penetration of regulation" into the lives of barbers who must not cater even to one fellow African American if they want to stay in business. Péliné's descriptions of the aid-giving authorities' poking in the family's private life show how much they were exposed to the gaze of the authorities.

Disciplinary institutions create an attitude in people that Foucault calls "docile bodies:" "Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. ... [I]t [creates] an 'aptitude', a 'capacity', which it seeks to increase; ... and turns it into a relation of strict subjection" (138). A society of docile bodies is usually not marked by open violence because it is controlled by the inner aptitude developed by its members. The aptitude and capacity to behave and be according to the expectations of the disciplinary society are present in all four narratives every time members of the minority act in docile ways, according to racial expectations. Wright describes in detail the expected modes of behavior his friends have mastered, but he cannot make his own. They adopt their behavior to the expectations of Southern whites, while Wright's inability to act in such docile ways puts him in constant peril. Lakatos describes some of his relatives, most particularly his father, as being overly self-conscious about the law. These Gypsies act in accordance with all the expectations of authorities in order to try to avoid being stigmatized based on traditional Gypsy stereotypes. In her chapter titled "My People! My People!" Hurston describes in detail "well-mannered Negroes" (177) who are very careful not to offend majority society's expectations, and hence are extremely embarrassed by the behavior of "other Negroes ... with their shoes off, stuffing themselves with fried fish, bananas and peanuts, and throwing the garbage on the floor" (177). Péliné does not try to

conform her behavior to social expectations, but there are many hints in the book about how the majority society expects Gypsies to behave.

Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, introduces the notion of "walking in the city," a kind of movement that can defy the power structures of a disciplinary society and that can stand for an array of other modes of behavior that celebrate freedom within the oppressive structure. Unlike Foucault, who does not allow for any escape from the panopticon and from the disciplinary society, de Certeau argues that there are certain tactics of the weak that can defy these power structures. He makes a distinction between strategies and tactics, and investigates in detail what he sees as the much neglected territory of tactics. He calls a strategy "the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated. It postulates a place that can be delimited as its own" (de Certeau 36). A certain power is granted to the subject of strategy, based on the knowledge gained from spatial vision. A tactic, on the other hand, "is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus" (de Certeau 37). The subject of the tactic has no space of its own, and so the tactic is performed in the space of the other, "within the enemy's field of vision ... and within enemy territory" (de Certeau 37). The weak take advantage of the visibility of power and resort to trickery to achieve momentary advantages of opportunities arising time and again: this mode of behavior "operates in isolated actions, blow by blow" (de Certeau 37). A major example of the everyday practice of the weak has to do with walking in the city. The "ordinary practitioners of the city" in a sense defy the city-planners by making shortcuts, designing routes, making use of spaces—all these only within the time of walking, without altering

any spatial layout. "A migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city" (de Certeau 93). This migrational city, the map traced out by the random and intertwining walking of the practitioners, cannot be read because each space is only "owned" by the walker for a fragmentary second and the many paths intertwine into an illegible "poem;" the lines transcribing the paths cannot capture the act itself of passing by, they only retrace a space which never really belonged to the wanderer who passed by.

The imagery and terminology used by de Certeau to further Foucault's ideas are particularly useful in my study of books that contain many examples of city walks checked by the police, escapes to and from places, wanderings around countries, and movements in search of equality and prosperity. In what follows, I will compare the restless movements and wanderings described in the narratives. I will argue that the wanderings of Hurston and Péliné resemble the tactics of the weak as described by de Certeau, taking advantage of the little opportunities found in the fissures of an oppressing society. The directed motion to escape discrimination by moving to the North fails in Wright, as he himself describes it. Lakatos describes several types of movements and wanderings, pointing out that it is impossible to go directly against social constraints but claiming some freedom through his own clever moves.

### **Wright: Expected Modes of Behavior and Restless Movement**

The similarities between slave narratives and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* have been noticed by several critics. Butterfield writes:

All the elements of slave narrative structure are present: self-taught literacy, education as a means to understand a brutal environment, resistance that preserves

one's integrity and goals as an individual human being, inability to fit the mold of a slave, anger and bitter discontent, the journey to the North, active group politics and movement up the social scale. (Butterfield 156)

Dubek calls *Black Boy* a "revision of the slave narrative" (Dubek 537), while Denissova states "[i]n *Black Boy* (or *American Hunger*) the writer has other models to follow. First and foremost is the slave-narrative tradition" (Denissova 245). Life in the Jim Crow South of *Black Boy* rivaled in hopelessness life under slavery; therefore, Richard's efforts to move to the North can be compared to Frederick Douglass's progress towards his escape. However, in order to understand the methods of resistance available to Wright, the differences between being a free but oppressed member of a minority group and being a slave must also be kept in mind. Adams states that "[t]he form of *Black Boy* in part imitates the traditional slave narrative, a literary type that allowed for a high degree of fictionality in the cause of abolition" (Adams 71). The undoubtedly "high degree of fictionality" presents a world of "random violence" (Butterfield 157) from which Richard wanted to escape. But, inasmuch as slavery had already been abolished, his narrative is clearly not in the cause of abolition. In order to study the options available to and actions undertaken by Richard, we must first focus on the world Richard refers to as "the culture from which I sprang ... the terror from which I fled" (257). And the starting point must be the obvious but fundamental differences between the literal "appropriation of bodies" in slavery and an extreme form of disciplinary methods designed to create "docile bodies" in the Jim Crow South.

The first important observation to make is that although the South, as presented in *Black Boy*, was not less repressive than slavery, it was repressive in different ways. In spite of the brutal cruelties and violent acts described in *Black Boy*, the emphasis is on the subtle ways of cruelty that are designed to drive home a feeling to all black people that

Griggs translates to Richard simply as, "Dick, look, you're black, black, *black*, see? Can't you understand that?" (183). Walter Benn Michaels shows how race became a political/cultural entity in the United States between 1890 and 1920. While the strict boundaries between slavery and freedom had still existed, there had been no "danger" in allowing some extra "rights" to the so-called "quality niggers ... [who were] just as stuck up as their masters" (Michaels 659). In some cases, familiarities between blacks and whites could also exist, described by Michaels as "family, black and white" (Michaels 662). However, by the twentieth century, Michaels argues, race was no longer seen as an absolute category, but had been redefined into a cultural category, the boundaries of which are of course easier to transgress. Hence, more inner – and to develop that – outer control became necessary. It became evident that there was no discontinuity between races—that is, "all the traits of all the races could be plotted somewhere along the curve; hence racial differences were necessarily 'not those of kind but those of degree; not those of quality but of quantity'" (Michaels 668). But rather than this leading to a decrease or denial in the significance of racial categories, it led to an increased emphasis on inequality: "Hankins's denial that racial differences are differences 'of kind' thus amounts to an insistence on racial inequality—if there are races, they must be unequal" (Michaels 669). Rather than a scientific category, race turned into a cultural category: "one prefers one's own race not because it is superior but because it is one's own" (Michaels 669). Defending this culture, according to Michaels, is a commitment to difference that "itself represents a theoretical intensification of racism, an intensification that has nothing to do with feelings of tolerance or intolerance toward other races and everything to do with the conceptual apparatus of pluralist racism" (Michaels 668). And what we can see in *Black*

*Boy* is that Richard perceives race exactly as this "conceptual apparatus" that he himself has difficulties making his own.

Furthermore, as race became a cultural category, it also stopped being—slowly but surely—the regional category it had been under slavery. "[F]reeing racism from slavery, it dissolved the sectional differences between North and South and replaced them with the racial difference between black and white, thus making possible the transsectional, white nation" (Michaels 670). As we will see below, this was one of the reasons why the slave narrative "formula" of escape into freedom could not possibly work for Wright even if he had had hopes and dreams about life in the North. Jacqueline Stewart also points out that one of the results of the Great Migration was increased racial strife in the northern cities as well. She describes the artificial boundaries drawn up between races, where black people of different backgrounds and interests were grouped into the same geographical location and given the same conceptual treatment. In the following description we see that the artificial category of "race" forced people to live together and share a common space in spite of their very different cultural backgrounds:

For example, during the Great Migration of 1916-19, between 50,000 and 70,000 black southerners poured into Chicago. The sharp, alarming rise in Chicago's black population resulted in various expressions of white racism, including routine discrimination in public accommodations and restrictive covenants limiting the areas in which black people, regardless of income, could find housing. Eventually, the bulk of Chicago's diverse African American population was hemmed into a narrow strip of the city's South Side known as the Black Belt. Although there was a basic sense of racial unity in the Belt, the Great Migration created and exposed many lines of fragmentation within the black community. Those African Americans who had struggled for years (sometimes generations) to attain some semblance of social standing and political influence in Chicago feared that the flood of rough, unlettered migrants would adversely affect the public image and social status of the race as a whole. (Stewart 656)

Not wearing the chains of slavery, nor—more importantly—having essentialist definitions of races, black people increasingly had to be made aware of which group

(which race) they belonged to. Race had to be interiorized. This is the process that Wright describes in *Black Boy*. One of the ways in which Richard was constantly reminded of his race and his expected behavior was the randomness of white violence (as Butterfield points out). Although he was hardly ever the subject of very serious racial incidents, he relates a whole series of minor violent acts carried out against him, the common thread linking them being their irrationality and unexpectedness. One such incident was when a group of young white men offered him to "hop on the running board" of their car when his bicycle's tire was punctured. They even offered him a drink, which he declined by saying, "Oh, no!" This seemingly innocent sentence caused them to beat him up with the explanation: "'Nigger, ain't you learned no better sense'n that yet?'" asked the man who hit me. 'Ain't you learned to say *sir* to a white man yet?'" (181). At another time, the police stopped him unexpectedly in a white neighborhood. After searching his pockets and packages at gun-point, they explained, "Boy, tell your boss not to send you out in white neighborhoods at this time of night" (182). Even more inexplicable is the scene when his white workmates created a situation designed to pit him in a fight against another black man: "The game of egging Harrison and me to fight, to cut each other, kept up for a week. We were afraid to tell the white men that we did not believe them, for that would have been tantamount to calling them liars or risking argument that might have ended in violence being directed against us" (240). Eventually, Richard and Harrison did decide to fight without hurting each other, in order to stop the nagging of the white people. The fact that the entire situation had been designed to reinforce racial differences is proven by the shouts of the white audience during the fight: "'Crush that nigger's nuts, nigger!' 'Hit that nigger!' 'Aw, fight, you goddam niggers!' 'Sock 'im in his f-k-g piece!' 'Make 'im bleed!'"

(242). It is obvious to Richard that the fight had been set up by the white men to reinforce the opposite of what they had said, "do you think I'm your friend? ... We like you round here. You act like a good boy" (234), and to bring about the humiliation he felt afterwards: "I hated him and I hated myself. I clutched my five dollars in my fist and walked home. ... I felt that I had done something unclean, something for which I could never properly atone" (243).

The random and unexpected violence described in *Black Boy* serves to make the African American population always keenly aware of their racial status and racial roles. The problem is that "with Richard, the process does not 'take'" (Butterfield 158). Richard describes at great length how he could not behave in the jocular manner expected of blacks in the South. For example, the store-owner where he worked asked him, "Why don't you laugh and talk like the other niggers?", and he replied "Well, sir, there's nothing much to say or smile about." But this was dangerous: "His face was baffled; I knew that I had not convinced him. He whirled from me and went to the front of the store; he came back a moment later, his face red. He tossed a few green bills at me. 'I don't like your looks, nigger. Now, get!' he snapped" (182). Discussing these situations with his friend Griggs, Richard realized that he was expected to learn and abide by the racial roles assigned to him, but he simply could not do so:

I looked at the people who had come out of the store; yes, they were *white*, but I had not noticed it. ... What Griggs was saying was true, but it was simply utterly impossible for me to calculate, to scheme, to act, to plot all the time. I would remember to dissemble for short periods, then I would forget and act straight and human again, not with the desire to harm anybody, but merely forgetting the artificial status of race and class. (184-185)

It is important that Wright did not "discover" that race and class were "artificial" groupings; his uniqueness consisted in not being able to "automatically" act according to

these roles—that is, he could not interiorize racial differences. His friends, Griggs and others, knew exactly that "*All these white folks dressed so fine / Their ass-holes smell just like mine,*" but they managed to develop "unconscious" modes of behavior that showed they knew their exact places and roles in society. Even as he laughed at the above ditty, Griggs "covered his mouth with his hand and bent at the knees, a gesture which was unconsciously to conceal his excessive joy in the presence of whites" (185). The "unconscious" ability of Griggs to laugh in the right way is contrasted by his consciousness that, he says, "infuriated white people" (196).

Understanding the disciplinary nature of Wright's Southern society, we can see how certain instances of violence within his family had actually been "designed" to prepare him for the role of a black boy in the South. Even though Richard Wright and his family had very little contact with white people during the normal course of events, they lived a life in which they always had to be prepared for random violence from the white community. In one incident described by Butterfield, "his Uncle Hoskins, in a playful mood, drives their horse and cart into the Mississippi River and convinces the boy Richard that he is heading straight for the middle 'so the horses can drink.' Richard takes him seriously and jumps out of the cart in panic. ... The action of Uncle Hoskins is part of a process of acculturation that prepared black children for a world of random violence and danger" (Butterfield, 157-158). Throughout his narrative, Wright is preoccupied with this "acculturation," calling himself incapable of getting used to it, while at the same time understanding its necessity for survival. He "never trusted [Uncle Hoskins] after that" (53) any more than he could forgive Uncle Tom, who "was going to teach [him] to act as [he] had seen the backward black boys act on the plantations, was going to teach

[him] to grin, hang [his] head, and mumble apologetically when [he] was spoken to" (158). The irony of the situation is that Uncle Hoskins himself was soon "killed by whites who had long coveted his flourishing liquor business" (54). Bryant describes Wright's antagonism to the behavior of his family and friends:

In Wright's mind, his family, friends, and acquaintances, like Bigger's, collaborated in their own oppression, refusing to contemplate any act or thought outside approved bounds. When they discover that Wright has struck through those bounds to unapproved consciousness, they warn him that he is going past the limits set for him by the racial culture, just as his little brother had warned him about the fire and the curtains. The metaphor contains all the elements of the hero's struggle against darkness and oppression, together with the grandeur of a defeat that is also a victory. (Bryant 206).

This is true, but it is also true that Wright saw clearly that in order to survive in the South, one had to interiorize these modes of behavior. Even at an early age, his family and surroundings managed to evoke in him the racial feeling against whites he did not yet even know: "A dread of white people now came to live permanently in my feelings and imagination. ... Nothing challenged the totality of my personality so much as this pressure of hate and threat that stemmed from the invisible whites" (73). Later, suffering the minor violences mentioned above, he became more and more conscious of the dangers his lack of consciousness about racial behavior involved: "My sustained expectation of violence had exhausted me. My preoccupation with curbing my impulses, my speech, my movements, my manner, my expressions had increased my anxiety. I became forgetful, concentrating too much upon trivial tasks" (195). He even traces a certain amount of progress in himself, being able to answer white people the way he was expected to: "'Boy, how's it going,' he asked. 'Oh, fine, sir!' I answered with false heartiness, falling quickly into that nigger-being-a-good-natured-boy-in-the-presence-of-a-white-man pattern, a pattern into which I could now slide easily; although I was

wondering if he had any criticism to make of my work" (234). In spite of his conscious efforts at being able to unconsciously act the way he was expected to, he felt that his efforts were doomed to failure. This is why he felt he had to get away from the South.

We have seen that the direct violence of slavery had been replaced by the random violence of the strict disciplinary society of the Jim Crow South. As Wright could not get acculturated to this disciplinary mode of behavior, he centers his narrative around his dreams of going North. In that respect, his desire to escape from the oppressive South to the North can be compared to the importance of escape in slave narratives. This comparison has been made several times, but it is also important to see the differences between the directed escape in slave narratives and the restless movement of Wright. This difference results from the different type of oppression he encountered both in the South and in the North.

Yoshinobu Hakutani points out the images of imprisonment present in *Black Boy*, that recall the chains of slavery: "I seemed forever condemned,' he says, 'ringed by walls'. This image of imprisonment recurs throughout the book" (Hakutani 119). Butterfield calls Richard's movement "restless," but still compares it to the escape in slave narratives: "the restless movement takes the form of flight to the North" (Butterfield 167). Robert J. Butler also links Wright to an earlier tradition, like "the journey across the River Jordan celebrated by the spirituals, the odyssey down the road extolled by the blues" (Butler 5), but he also points out the futility of escape as experienced by Wright: "conflicting images of motion and stagnation [are] presented in Wright's *Black Boy*" and "Wright's outer journey takes the form of a series of apparently random moves which end in paralysis" (Butler 9).

Wright describes his desire to leave for the North as a direct result of not being able to "laugh and talk like the other" (182) blacks. He describes his dream of going away in defiance not of the direct cruelties or chains, but of the subtle ways in which society had tried to shape him into a "docile body:" "I was building up in me a dream which the entire educational system of the South had been rigged to stifle. I was feeling the very thing that the state of Mississippi had spent millions of dollars to make sure that I would never feel" (169). And if the very self-conscious child Richard knew this, the author Wright knew also that a physical escape to the North cannot solve this problem: "I dreamed of going north and writing books, novels. The North symbolized to me all that I had not felt and seen; it had no relation whatever to what actually existed. Yet, by imagining a place where everything was possible, I kept hope alive in me" (168). The original published ending of *Part One: Southern Night*, emphasizes this even more: "I was now running more away from something than toward something. But that did not matter to me. My mood was: I've got to get away; I can't stay here" (412). This fits Butler's description of not very hopeful escapes "with bittersweet images of the heroes moving vaguely North in search of new lives which may or may not be available to them" (Butler 5).

And indeed, it is in *Part Two: The Horror and the Glory*, that Wright fully develops the nature of the disciplinary society, from which there is nowhere to run. Ramadanovic calls attention to the fact that *Black Boy* "is still interpreted as if there were no substantial differences between the original version he wrote and the truncated 1945 *Black Boy* Wright published as a compromise" and calls for a "thorough reexamination of Wright's oeuvre [in] explaining the implications of Wright's compromise" (Ramadanovic

504) in publishing only *Part One* in 1945. One reason for the truncated edition could be exactly the painful description of how his race-consciousness had to be furthered in the North. He had to learn that being part of a race, with all its concomitant elements, is not an external condition from which he can escape into a free society. Rather, race-consciousness must be internalized, and he has to behave according to these rules in the North as well as the South. This is true even if open racism was certainly less evident in the North. In the following quotation, he talks about the depths of his mind, a "sprawling land of unconscious suffering." A way of being a "Negro" must be learned by him in the depths of his self, and there is a great distance between that self and the lures and promises of Northern society. Hence, he slowly learns "race", slowly internalizes it. What others of his race had already learned in the South, he escaped in order not to have to learn it. So, he has to go through a "second childhood." He had tried not to become a "Negro" in the South, and he had hoped that he could simply be a human being in the North. But in the North, he realizes that now he has to learn these modes of behavior. They have to become a part of his inner self. But unlike others, he wants to stay always conscious of it:

(Slowly I began to forge in the depths of my mind a mechanism that repressed all the dreams and desires that the Chicago streets, the newspapers, the movies were evoking in me. I was going through a second childhood; a new sense of the limit of the possible was being born in me. What could I dream of that had the barest possibility of coming true? I could think of nothing. And, slowly, it was upon exactly that nothingness that my mind began to dwell, that constant sense of wanting without having, of being hated without reason. A dim notion of what life meant to a Negro in America was coming to consciousness in me, not in terms of external events, lynchings, Jim Crowism, and the endless brutalities, but in terms of crossed-up feeling, of psyche pain. I sensed that Negro life was a sprawling land of unconscious suffering, and there were but few Negroes who knew the meaning of their lives, who could tell their story.) (267)

What he never realized in the South, he had to realize in the North: "It was in the psychological distance that separated the races that the deepest meaning of the problem of the Negro lay for me" (272). He compares the North favorably to the South: "Though I had fled the pressure of the South, my outward conduct had not changed. I had been schooled to present an unalteringly smiling face and I continued to do so despite the fact that my environment allowed more open expression" (273). But even so, he shares the cynicism of his Irish workmate: "He was as cynical as I was regarding uplift and hope, and we were proud of having escaped what we called the 'childhood disease of metaphysical fear'" (285). In New York, he could not get accommodation, either from his fellow Communists or in the hotels, even in Harlem. "But again, the problem of clubs did not seem important. What did seem important was: Could a Negro ever live halfway like a human being in this goddam country?" (349).

From the point of view of motion, then, we can see that a directed escape is not the main type of motion in *Black Boy*. There is a tension in the book between Richard's dream of escaping to an idealized North and the knowledge throughout that such a place does not exist. Restless motion thus becomes significant in a different way than in slave narratives. Butler compares *Black Boy* to the American picaresque tradition, saying that "[f]ar from being a sign of purposelessness and incoherence, Wright's pursuit of open motion endowed his life with real energy and purpose. Indeed, it helps to account for his triumph as a man and an artist" (Butler 6). The triumph, however, is not the triumph of finding a place of freedom, but rather of never giving up the search, or at least the desire, for such a place.

Ramadanovic compares Wright to Lacan's comic hero for the same reason: "According to Lacan, a comic hero faces and undergoes numerous life-threatening, sometimes deadly injuries but, in contrast to a tragic hero, comes out of them practically unscathed ... Wright's *Black Boy (American Hunger)* make[s] use of a similar figure, the indestructible, self-recreating hero" (Ramadanovic 502). Thus, Wright makes use of the structure of the slave narrative tradition when he centers his hero's life around the axis of moving in search of freedom from the South to the North. But in the process, Richard becomes keenly and painfully aware of the mechanism of a disciplinary society that does not contain the possibility of escape from expected forms of racial behavior, whether in the South or in the North. Richard's movements thus serve two purposes: on the one hand, they lead him towards this awareness and knowledge of his society, and on the other, they also symbolize his inner freedom as a picaro or a comic hero.

### **Lakatos: Restless Movement and Wandering**

While Richard in *Black Boy* lived in a very strict, racially divided disciplinary society, the author claims that he could not accept such living conditions, and, for a long time, he re-enacted a part of slavery times, suggesting that an escape could enable him to get out of the oppression. Lakatos also finds the disciplinary constraints of his society oppressive and alien to his personality. He opens his book by portraying a better world, a world in which Gypsy people could freely roam across the national boundaries of Eastern Europe, living "outside" of the social constraints, the panoptic control of society. Even though this image is portrayed as being in the faraway past, its strategic placing at the beginning of the book contrasts the present-day situation of control and random violence.

To avoid random violence as best he can Lakatos also shifts to restless movement, a movement that recalls the wanderings of his ancestors. In fact, this movement has more to do with the escape of someone who does not want to accept the constraints of the disciplinary society. In this sense, he is similar to Wright, whose movements recalled the escape to freedom of Douglass and slave narratives, but were necessarily made restless in the hopeless search for a place that falls out of the panoptic control of an oppressive society.

*Smoky Pictures* opens with a description of the memories of a "free-roaming" past, a time when the protagonist's grandfather still lived the traditional life of traveling Gypsies, defying the national boundaries and social constraints of the territory in which they lived. Lakatos aligns his feelings with the old lady, Liza, who told him tales about this past:

We were a people whose blood had the fire of life in it; neither the winds nor the winters, cruel as they were, could extinguish its flames. By the time I knew Liza, she was a small, shriveled, old lady, who loved to sit on the ground. She put her chin on her knees, pulled up to her head, and she held her pipe in her hand as she talked. She perfectly preserved the past centuries. This world was alien to her, she felt that always staying in the same place was like being in prison. (7)<sup>140</sup>

It is very important to note that the Gypsy travels of the past symbolize freedom for the writer of the book, even if in reality their life might have been lived out of necessity and poverty at the time. The symbolism of the sea in the stories of another old lady, Mámi, is very important to the author, who lived in landlocked Hungary:

We traveled from the great water to the great water. Mámi never used the word 'sea,' perhaps she did not even know the word. She only said, 'bári pályi.' I never knew whether this travel was from the Black Sea to the Adriatic, or from the

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<sup>140</sup> "Azok voltunk, akiknek a vérébe tüzet rakott az élet, sem a szelek, sem a telek, bármilyen mogorvák voltak, nem oltották ki lángját. Lizát kis, töpörödött asszonynak ismertem, aki csak a földön szeretett ülni. Állát felhúzott térdére tette, ha beszélt, szár nélküli pipáját állandóan tenyerében szorongatta. Tökéletesen megőrizte az elmúlt századokat. Idegen volt előtte ez a világ, a helyhezkööttséget rabságnak érezte" (7).

Black Sea to the Mediterranean. She polished bright even the smallest memories of her youth. She talked about her ancestors as the embodiments of bravery and brains. (9)<sup>141</sup>

Even accounts of stealing in the past are made heroic in the novel, symbolizing the freedom of a people who could defy the traditional, settled societies of the time. This is portrayed not as a sign of depravity or lawlessness, but rather as living a life that is independent of the mainstream societies' laws and restrictions, but carries within it the "Gypsy laws" of respect, "Romano Kriszi." This calls attention to the existence of laws at moments that may seem lawless to the reader—laws that differ from the notion of law observed in more restrictive disciplinary societies.

The territory of the clans (*dolmutas*) is the area from where they pilfer gold, horses, and clothes. ... Those to whom the territory belongs never live there. ... Why would any clan take any other's territory? We never went to any other clan's territory. Let them try, they would face the 'kriszi' and learn what Gypsy law means. (14-15)<sup>142</sup>

The opening situation of the book is that the protagonist's father had given up this traditional lifestyle, an obviously romanticized way of living—a style of life unavailable to the protagonist but kept alive in his memory through history and tales. His earliest memories are memories of feeling "stolen and cheated," of being locked up in the prison of his family's oppressed lifestyle:

Even though these wild and primitive ideas did not concern us, settled Gypsies, my father could not forget them. They have become a part of him, as he was already 20 when he left the clans (*dolmutas*). ... I agreed with Mámi and practically blamed my father for giving up his free life for the oppressing prison

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<sup>141</sup> "A nagyvíztől a nagyvízig jártunk. Mámi nem mondta, hogy tenger, talán nem is tudta, csak annyit mondott: bárí pályi. Aztán, hogy ez az út a Fekete-tengertől az Adriáig tartott, vagy a Fekete-tengertől a Földközi-tengerig, soha nem tudtam meg. Fiatalkorából a legkisebb emléket is fényesre csiszolta. Úgy emlegette elődeit, mint a bátorság és az ész megtestesült mintaképeit" (9).

<sup>142</sup> "A dolmuták járása, ahonnan, aranyat, lovakat meg ruhákat csórelnek. ... Soha nem laknak ott azok, akiké a terület. ... Miért foglalják el? Mi sem mentünk a más területére. Próbálják csak meg, kriszi elé mennek, majd megtudják, mi az a cigánytörvény" (14-15).

of the shanty. I was crying over my fate, as someone who had been stolen and cheated, and it was not my fault at all. (13)<sup>143</sup>

Besides travel and stealing, the third major symbol of the freedom of "old times" is the horse. Horses were both the best means of travel and the most valued objects to be stolen (see p. 121). His father's attachment to traditional life is proven by how much he values horses and how much he knows about them. Therefore, it is not surprising that Boncza, in his first formative experience of trying to sense something of the free past he has heard about from the elders, *goes away to steal alfalfa for his horse*. This is so even though he proclaims not to like horses, thus foreshadowing that his inclinations will take him far from his father's world. His parents' reaction to his youthful act of defiance and freedom is just as symbolic, as they send him to the police for a good beating. So, they clearly take a stance against even minor stealing, emphasizing their alliance to the laws of society at large (as opposed to the different set of laws of the traditional "romano kriszi"). To further emphasize their cultured belonging to the mainstream society, they even make the young Lakatos dress up nicely as he goes to the police to give himself up. This early formative experience shows that they are self-consciously not the free traveling Gypsies any more, but settled down, law-abiding Gypsy citizens.

Of course, the society to which Lakatos's parents thus announce their membership does everything to isolate Gypsies and control them in a disciplinary fashion. The settlement of the Gypsies is called *Gypsy Paris*, an ironic name for the downtrodden outskirts of a small town. The description of life in this slum shows clearly how society

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<sup>143</sup> "Bár ezek a vad, primitív ítéletek már régen nem vonatkoztak a települt cigányokra, azonban a beidegződött és vérévé vált ősi szokást apámnak nem volt könnyű elfelejtenie, hiszen húszéves korában hagyta ott a dolmutákat. ... Máminak adtam igazat, szinte nehezteltem apámra, mert felcserélte szabad életét egy putri nyomasztó rabságával. Meglopott, megcsaltként búsultam sorsom felett, rám is ez vár, pedig egyáltalán nem én tehetek róla" (13).

had circumscribed and delimited the Gypsy population, so as to control it. The Gypsy enclosure itself is a well-defined area, a place that at once belongs to the town and is isolated from it. It is strikingly similar to the enclosure described by Foucault: "Discipline sometimes requires *enclosure*, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself. It is the protected place of disciplinary monotony. There was the great 'confinement' of vagabonds and paupers" (141). Even though Gypsy Paris as an enclosure did not have the rigid rules of institutions described by Foucault, its well-defined boundaries and its functioning served to isolate, confine, and control.

One of the methods of the disciplinary society was to localize the Roma inside Gypsy Paris. Even though Lakatos does not dwell too much on the violent control of Gypsies, a careful reading of his text shows that every move *out* of the enclosure was met with signs of disapproval, thus reminding the protagonist of his position in society. The post-office clerk looks at him strangely, saying, "'Where is the letter?' Her voice sounded like that of a sheriff" (22).<sup>144</sup> When a group of Roma children go and sing Christmas carols, they get a basketful of "gift" from one of the houses, which turns out to be "sheepshit" (69).<sup>145</sup> As he travels on the train, Boncza is yelled at: "'This is the students' coach, hey!' big-assed Molnár yelled at me as I boarded the train" (95).<sup>146</sup> At school, he is made fun of even when the teacher speaks kindly to him: "So, let us ask our little Negro, can he tells us whether..." (39).<sup>147</sup> The sheriff and the police sometimes raided Gypsy Paris on account of some theft in the neighborhood, but the purpose was usually not to find the actual perpetrators, but only to wreak havoc and instill fear in them: "The sheriffs made a

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<sup>144</sup> "'Hol a levél?' Hangja hasonlított a csendőrökéhez" (22).

<sup>145</sup> "Kiborította a kosárból a birkaszart" (69).

<sup>146</sup> "Ez diákkocsi, hé! kiáltott rám a segges Molnár, mikor be akartam szállni" (95).

<sup>147</sup> "Na, halljuk a kis Négust, meg tudja-e mondani, hogy...?" (39).

mess as they searched the entire shack in search of the gun many times, but they never found it" (55).<sup>148</sup>

For Boncza, the most memorable and most decisive example of literally random violence was when he was shot in the back by a drunken hunter, whose company was "entertained" by Roma children making fun of themselves for money. In a situation that can remind us of the fight instigated by whites between Wright and Harrison for the whites' entertainment and the black boys' humiliation, here Gypsy boys are made to throw their bodies around in a humiliating way to entertain the company of drunken hunters:

The Gypsy children soon made the best of the situation. They realized that the crowd had become too drunk to enjoy their dance after a while. Instead, they wanted the Gypsies to fall to the ground and twitch their bodies around like so many wild animals after having been shot. (43)

While the children accept this belittling role, Lakatos himself stays out of the game and helps his one friend, who suffers an epileptic seizure as a result of the wild entertainment. His unusually sober behavior in this animal-like entertainment draws the anger of one of the drunken hunters present. In a fit of passion, he shoots at Boncza and seriously wounds him. So, here the violence is literally random, unexpected, and un-asked for. Nevertheless, there is some reason behind it, as it is "provoked" by Boncza, who refuses to humiliate himself and act like an animal.

The behavior of Doctor Bocz also demonstrates the technique of localizing and isolating Gypsies. His refusal to enter the enclosure shows their separation, and his attitude towards their health problems is also an example of isolation:

Doctor Bocz was feared in the entire community. ... He never went out to any sick patient.

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<sup>148</sup> "A csendőrök néhányszor feldúlták már pisztolyért a putrit, de nem találták" (55).

"Is he alive?" he would ask. "Why didn't he come himself to see me? Call me only after he is dead."

Nobody wanted his cure. Everybody would rather suffer or die than be "cured" by Doctor Bocz.

Like a maniac, he was hunting for lice all the time. He knew of only one cure: a pair of scissors. He used it for all kinds of illnesses.

"Where is the corpse?" he would shout at the edge of our territory. "Did you eat it? Shall I burn down this entire community of bacteria?" (118-119)

Restless movement characterizes the life of Boncza in *Smoky Pictures* as much as it characterizes the life of Richard in *Black Boy*. In both cases, the movement is "an almost manic" desire to get away from the crippling enclosure of the childhood dwelling place—Gypsy Paris and the Jim Crow South, respectively. Unlike Richard, Boncza does not have an ideal place and ideal life in his dreams to try to run away to. Nevertheless, his restless movement is also a result of the random violence of the disciplinary society in which he lives, and is also a demonstration of his attempts at resisting the disciplinary power structures. It is a picaresque journey in the sense Butler calls Wright's travels picaresque: "pursuit of open motion [that] endowed his life with real energy and purpose" (Butler 6), serving both to describe the world beyond Gypsy Paris and to demonstrate Boncza's survival skills. Thus, he is also a "comic hero" in the sense that Ramadanovic calls Richard a comic hero, going through life-threatening deadly injuries but always emerging practically unscathed. A look at a few instances of Boncza's restless movement shows clearly his defiance of the power structure and his survival skills.

His first major movement is an ironic reversal of the first formative experience of being sent to the police for a beating. In this situation a few years later, Boncza is innocent of the theft the sheriff accuses him of. It was his friend, Bada, who had stolen some insignificant ceramic storks, and Boncza is innocently beaten up for it by the sheriff, called Kurucsó. But the story is not finished with this first beating, as Kurucsó

goes to Gypsy Paris the following day in order to continue his search for the stolen merchandise. Unlike in the earlier case of the alfalfa, here the father tries to protect Boncza: "You are not going anywhere, go feed the horse. And if you [speaking to Kurucsó] have suffered any loss, I will pay for it. Here, take these two pengős [coins]. But Kurucsó paid no attention to my father, he came after me. I started to run" (144).<sup>149</sup>

The ensuing chase ends with Boncza's seriously wounding Kurucsó:

Perhaps it was the devil himself who put in my way an old horseshoe, with rusty nails sticking out of it, looking like a bug on its back. I did not stop and think about picking it up, I did not rejoice upon seeing it, I did not have the time to think that it could be my means of escape. My instincts were at work. I felt the heavy iron piece in my hand, and without even trusting my luck, I blindly threw the horseshoe behind my back, with all my remaining force. (146)<sup>150</sup>

The image of the horse is significant throughout. The father told him to "feed the horse," indicating that this time he will protect his son from the police. Boncza manages to escape with the help of a horseshoe. Furthermore, he and his friend will use this forced exile from Gypsy Paris to steal horses from neighboring Romania. Thus, we can clearly see an interplay between the free-roaming past and the law-abiding disciplinary present. Boncza is innocent of what he was accused of, so he is law-abiding. But he seriously wounds the sheriff with the horseshoe, an act of violent defiance against the unjust police. His travel and the stealing of horses recall images of the free-roaming past. But the fact that he and his friend have to hide from the police dispels any serious romantic associations with this travel. In a passage whose significance is emphasized by its containing one of the few mentions of the book's title, *Lakatos* seems to draw parallels

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<sup>149</sup> "Nem mész sehova, eredj, legeltesd a lovat. Neked meg, ha valami kárt tett, kifizetem. Tessék, itt van két pengő – nyújtotta Kurucsó felé. Az rá sem figyelt, jött utánam. Sietni kezdtem" (144).

<sup>150</sup> "Talán az ördög vetett elém egy ócska lópatkót, rozsdás szegekkel az ég felé meredve, mint egy hátára fektetett százlábú bogár. Egyáltalán nem gondoltam rá, hogy felveszem, nem tudtam örülni a megpillantásának, nem jutott időm arra gondolni, hogy eszköze lehet a menekülésnek. Az ösztön cselekedett, azt éreztem, hogy a kezemben a súlyos vasdarab, szerencsét sem remélve, vakon, utolsó erőmet beleadva hátam mögé dobtam a patkót" (146).

between this escape and the free-roaming past as described by Mámi and Liza at the beginning of the book: "The succession of days and nights, lights and shadows, the complementariness of cold and warmth, eternity without minutes or hours. I have been to this island, its smoky pictures come back to me, as if it had not happened three years ago, but thirty or three hundred" (149).<sup>151</sup> But the feeling of freedom associated with timeless roaming around in nature is clearly checked by the hero's awareness of the impossibility of escape from the constraints of this disciplinary society: "No. No, because this way – I was looking for the correct ideas – is the way of escape. – I had to smile at this untrue, meaningless idea. The way of escape? This? I shook my head as I was feeling sorry for my own faults. To escape from this world? Where to?" (149).<sup>152</sup>

Unlike his friend Bada, for whom adventures of this kind seemed quite enjoyable, Boncza describes the pains of running away and escape:

These turns in my life could never pass without causing a turmoil in me. Not belonging anywhere, the disappearance without a trace for hours and years, the devouring of the minutes and moments, the constant escape, the all-is-the-same, just get away from here, to hell, to prison, to nothingness, or to the other timeless world, just to get away from here, if one must rot, let it not be here. (273)<sup>153</sup>

Boncza compares himself to Bada in order to emphasize his own wishes and desires. One of his wishes is to become a tree of knowledge. In a sense, this is not unlike the imagined North of Wright, the desire for an ideal place or position free of oppression and the need to escape, and conducive to self-expression. In the following monologue during their

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<sup>151</sup> "A nappalok és az éjszakák váltakozása csak a fény és árnyék, a hideg vagy a meleg egymást kiegészítő összetartozása, percek és órák nélküli örökkévalóság. Jártam ezen a szigeten, visszatérnek füstös képei, melyeket mintha nem is három, hanem harminc vagy száz év távolából néznék" (149).

<sup>152</sup> "Nem. Nem bizony, mert ez az út – megpróbáltam megfelelő gondolatot keresni – a menekülés útja. – Elmosolyodtam a hazug, semmitmondó gondolaton. A menekülés útja? Ez? Csóváltgattam a fejem, sajnálkoztam saját gyarlóságomon. Menekülni ebből a világból? Ugyan hová?" (149).

<sup>153</sup> "Az életnek ezek a fordulatai soha nem tudtak úgy bekövetkezni, hogy fel ne zaklassanak. A sehova nem tartozás, az órák, évek nyomtalan eltűnése, a percek, pillanatok habzsolása, az örök menekülés, a minden mindegy, csak el innen, el a pokolba, a börtönbe, a megsemmisülésbe vagy a másik, időtlen süllyedő világba, csak el, ha már el kell rohadni, akkor ne itt" (273).

escape, Boncza tries to attach a meaning to their running away, and by extension, a meaning to his own life:

I don't know what Bada was thinking about. I was sorry for not being a tree, one among the many here standing here for perhaps a hundred years, strong, hard, getting higher and higher to see farther and farther. What other goal can there be for a tree or for a man than to look into the obscure distance, to defy time, knowing that every fall is followed by a budding spring, knowing that there is no death, only rebirth. But what is it that we know in our dwarf world? (273-4)<sup>154</sup>

It is clear that he defines his goals as the opposite of running away and escape; rather, he searches for constancy and knowledge. The physical escape of movement is replaced by his desire for a better world in which freedom is guaranteed and restless movement is no longer necessary. In contrast to the aimless escapes of Bada, Boncza's narrative focuses on a different kind of escape, that of knowledge, education, and respect. This is what he expresses when he compares himself to his friend: "He simply has to leave his home, but I have to get outside of myself if I want to be considered as somebody" (328).<sup>155</sup>

The third movement that must be considered is the incident when he tells a girl, Cicus, he has been flirting with that he is a Roma. She never realized his race until this point, and her reaction is obviously extreme: "'Gypsy', she blurted out in spite of herself. There were her light blue eyes that resembled a purple fire burning into ashes a planet that had lost its course. Then her look froze. I nodded my head once again, affirming the truth of what I had said. Then I left her" (378).<sup>156</sup> It is obvious that Boncza would not

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<sup>154</sup> "Nem tudom, Bada mire gondolt, én azt sajnáltam, hogy nem vagyok, fa, valamelyik itt a sok közül, amelyik talán száz éve is elmúlt, hogy itt áll, izmosan, keményen, egyre feljebb törve, hogy minél messzebb lásson. Mi más célja lehet egy fának vagy az embernek, áttekinteni a homályborította messzeséget, dacolni az idővel, tudni, minden lombhullást virágzás követ, tudni, hogy nincs elmúlás csak megújulás. de mit tudunk mi ebben a törpe fekete világunkban?" (273-4).

<sup>155</sup> "Neki hazulról kell elmenni, nekem a bőrömből kell kibújni, ha azt akarom, hogy valaminek tekintsenek" (328).

<sup>156</sup> "'Cigány,'- buggyant ki belőle akaratlanul. Kék szemeiben olyan fény lobbant, mint pályájáról letért bolygót megsemmisítő lila izzás, majd belefagyott minden a tekintetébe. Még egy ideig bólogattam, bizonyágul szavam való igazságára, aztán otthagytam" (378).

have been able to "pass" (hide his race) in front of this girl for much longer anyway, but his open and decisive attitude in this manner proves that he refuses to play along futile practices of trickery, and prefers the open confrontation of all or nothing. The constraints of the world around him are upon him with their full force, and he wants to get out of being entrapped: "It would have been great to run away somewhere, leave the tolling bells and music behind. But where to? Out of this world? Life is the severest prison guard, it never gives more than what is written..." (377).<sup>157</sup>

In a sense, living *inside* Gypsy Paris meant a certain amount of independence from mainstream society. Here, among the Roma, some memories of past customs and traditions were still alive. "At night, Paris was loudly alive" (121).<sup>158</sup> As we have seen, the social controls were mostly directed at Gypsies leaving the enclosure for any reason. Gypsy Paris, by contrast, was an enclosure that isolated Gypsies but into which the disciplinary control did not fully penetrate. It is at the end of the book, with the approach of an epidemic and of war, that social control becomes stricter even within the boundaries of the enclosure. This can also be better understood by reading Foucault, who explains how the disciplinary power structure took advantage of the plague in order to increase control over individuals:

The plague is met by order; its function is to sort out every possible confusion; that of the disease, which is transmitted when bodies are mixed together; that of the evil, which is increased when fear and death overcome prohibitions. It lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him. (Foucault 197)

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<sup>157</sup> "Jó lett volna elszaladni valahová, itthagyni a harangzúgást, zeneszót, de hová? Ki a világból? Hiszen az élet a legszigorúbb börtönőr, soha nem enged többet, csak amennyi meg van írva" (377).

<sup>158</sup> "Esténként harsogott a Párizs" (121).

At the end of *Smoky Pictures*, it is exactly a serious epidemic among the Gypsies and the approach of World War II that show that any kind of escape is impossible. The covert discrimination and avoidance of Roma gave way to open racism as a result of the spreading of the disease: "No Gypsy was allowed inside any of the houses in the village. In the stores, the clerks touched even our money with a paper in their hands, so as not to catch the disease" (434).<sup>159</sup> Boncza's escape seems more reasonable than ever, but also more impossible: "My father started to cry. Later, he again tried to talk me into running away, but realized that there was no point in doing so. They are keeping an account of all of us, and are checking for everybody's presence every day" (434-5).<sup>160</sup> The increasing restrictions on their lives is further shown by the official veterinarian's order that Boncza's father's horse, the family's greatest treasure, had to be killed for fear of spreading the disease. Boncza summarizes the impossibility to escape control in the following sentence: "Even the trickiest of Gypsy tricks failed. Nobody wanted to escape, hide away, or pretend illness" (439).<sup>161</sup>

### **Hurston: Wandering to Claim Her Freedom**

As opposed to Wright, whose well-directed aim was to escape to the North, like slaves did in slave narratives, Hurston emphasizes that she is a wanderer. As Will Brantley states, "the image Hurston creates of herself [is] a 'wanderer'" (Brantley 195). A close look at her movements, at her wanderings, reveals that, unlike Wright and Lakatos,

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<sup>159</sup> "A falu házainak egyetlen kapuján be nem tehetett cigány a lábát. Az üzletekben papírral fogták meg a pénzt, nem kívánták elkapni tőlünk a betegséget" (434).

<sup>160</sup> "Apám elsírta magát, később még egyszer megpróbált rábírní a szökésre, de aztán rájött, hogy nincs értelme. Nyilvántartásba vettek bennünket, és naponként számon kértek mindenit" (434-5).

<sup>161</sup> "Csődöt mondtak a legrafináltabb cigány-furfangok, szökni, bújni, beteget színlelni senki sem akart" (439).

she is not in search of freedom; rather she lives out whatever freedom is available to her. While Wright moves about in order to gain freedom, Hurston moves around in order to prove her freedom. Even though she does not write about race relations as much as Wright does, she lives in the same Jim Crow South. Her decision not to emphasize the difficulties of racial discrimination is one of her many practices to fight social constraints by simply defying or ignoring them. There are many types of these everyday resistances present not only in Hurston, but in all four books. Hurston and Péliné, however, seem to emphasize these tactics of the weak more than the male authors. In this section and the next, I will study the images of wandering and physical movement that demonstrate how Hurston and Péliné challenge existing racial and social boundaries.

Brantley points out that Hurston describes her wandering movement as having started with her very first steps: "she credits an angry sow with initially prompting her to get off her feet and go" (195), and states that "[w]andering implies a certain aimlessness but also a challenging of the social constrictions of both gender and race" (195). Brantley's observation can be augmented by stating that this very early wandering of the child Zora challenges not only constrictions of gender and race, but, at her age, more importantly, the limits and roles assigned to her by her parents. The entire passage of her early wanderings reads as follows.

The strangest thing about it was that once I found the use of my feet, they took to wandering. I always wanted to go. I would wander off in the woods alone, following some inside urge to go to places. This alarmed my mother a great deal. She used to say that she believed a woman who was an enemy of hers had sprinkled 'travel dust' around the doorstep the day I was born. That was the only explanation she could find. I don't know why it never occurred to her to connect my tendency with my father, who didn't have a thing on his mind but this town and the next one. (23)

Wandering was thus an inner urge for her, a personal characteristic that she claims to have been with her from the very beginning. But even in this first description of her wanderings, we can see its provocative, dangerous nature. As we have seen, the mother used to encourage her to "jump at the sun," while the father was more cautious, especially about dealings with white people. But in the case of wanderings, the situation is reversed. It is the mother who worries about Zora, who claims to take after her father in this respect. Thus, we can see that both parents have something to worry about because Zora describes herself as one who has inherited the more daring characteristics of both. Her wanderings at this early stage, as well as her eagerness to "jump at the sun," are described in order to show her freedom and independence of spirit, a freedom that goes beyond both of her parents' imaginations.

Hurston, like Wright, discovered her artistic inclination at a very early stage of life. But while Wright was searching for a place where he could write, Zora used images of wandering to describe the freedom of her imagination, a craving for knowledge, and an ability for decisive action. One example is her description of the time when she goes to find the horizon. She and her friend, Carrie Roberts, had childish arguments, as both claimed the moon followed *her*, wherever she went. As they couldn't resolve this issue, Zora suggested that they go to the end of the world to see where the horizon was: "Every way I turned, it was there, and the same distance away. Our house then, was in the center of the world. It grew upon me that I ought to walk out to the horizon and see what the end of the world was like" (27). When they decided to go and see the horizon, she could hardly sleep: "I had been yearning for so many months to find out about the end of things. I had no doubts about the beginnings. They were somewhere in the five acres that

was home to me. Most likely in Mama's room. Now, I was going to see the end, and then I would be satisfied" (27-28). When Carrie cancelled the trip, Zora "had to hit Carrie to keep [her] heart from stifling [her]" (28). And she did not give up the idea of the journey. Childish though this story may sound, it certainly serves to describe Zora as a person of independent spirit and curiosity, endowed with even the physical abilities to fight her way through. She wanted a "fine black riding-horse" (28) from her father, when her siblings wanted baseball outfits, pumps, belts, and the like for Christmas: "You ain't like none of de rest of my yung' uns" replied the angry father. "Since Papa would not buy me a saddle horse, I made one up. No one around me knew how often I rode my prancing horse, nor the things I saw in far places" (29). Her early childhood wanderings thus established her position in the family and among her friends, and portrayed her as one able to achieve her dreams.

Paying careful attention to Hurston's descriptions of herself as a wanderer in the rest of the book helps us to understand her ways of resisting racial oppression and disciplinary control in the South. While some critics consider her text to have been carefully written to appease white audiences and others fault her for not writing openly about racial confrontations, the independent spirit established in the descriptions of her childhood wanderings is maintained throughout the entire book, suggesting her ability to confront social constraints not by openly fighting them but by making use of the innumerable practices of everyday life available to her. Pam Bordelon states that

[s]he does not disclose in *Dust Tracks* how she felt the bitter divide of segregation, of having to share 'separate but equal' accommodations. ... Hurston must have felt the same raw feelings, but she never let on in *Dust Tracks*. To do so would have alienated her largely white audience. Instead Hurston was picking her way carefully through a loaded mine field of racial feelings, both hers and her liberal white readers'. (Bordelon 16)

The image of picking her way carefully across a loaded mine field is an apt description of her wanderings and her writings, that are shown to be self-conscious, calculated, and careful. She *may* have had in mind a desire not to alienate a white audience, as Lori Jirousek also suggests: "Rather than salvaging a supposedly fading African American culture, Hurston writes a hybrid text to reveal a hybrid and multi-directional cultural movement that far from threatening national stability, rather could enhance it" (Jirousek 418). However, neither of these critics notices that while she may not have confronted race issues openly, her careful writing denounces racial oppression exactly by showing her very independence from it. She celebrates her freedom against all odds, thus undermining the authoritative social constraints designed to quell her freedom.

A careful study of Judith Robey's line of argument shows exactly how the point of inner freedom can be missed by critics. Robey very astutely divides the book into three parts, each written in a different genre:

Each of these underlying genres – myth, the picaresque, and the essay – presents its own conception of the I and her relation to the world she inhabits. The overall progression in the narrative traces the protagonist's expulsion from the intimate world of childhood myth (where the self is an integral part of the all-black community into which she is born), her entry into the outside/white world as a picaro, and her emergence as the persona of 'the author' addressing her (white) audience in the final essay chapters. (Robey 668)

So far, I have dealt with what Robey calls the "myth" section of the book, and have shown that the image of wandering in this first section celebrates the child Zora's relative independence and freedom. Concerning the "picaresque" chapters, Robey states that Zora fails to express any real resistance because the picaro lacks internal development. This is the middle section of the book, Chapters 7 through 10, in which the young Zora is "wandering from one menial job to another, seizing whatever opportunities present themselves to her" (Robey 673). Disregarding all the internal turmoils and desires of the

protagonist, Robey concludes: "Like the picaresque novel, these central chapters reflect little of the protagonist's internalization of events or inner development, but present a distinctly satirical version of the world she traverses" (Robey 673). A careful reading of these chapters, however, reveals several instances of internalization and inner development, suggesting that Hurston goes beyond a picaro's statements of the world and celebrates a very self-conscious, careful resistance. Undoubtedly, her wanderings after her mother's death, introduced by the famous line: "That day began my wanderings. Not so much in geography, but in time" (89), were much more painful and difficult than her childhood dreamings. Nevertheless, unlike Robey's claim that the protagonist seized "whatever opportunities" presented themselves to her, Hurston describes her wanderings at this time as follows: "I was out of a job again. I got out of many more. Sometimes I didn't suit the people. Sometimes the people didn't suit me. Sometimes my insides tortured me so that I was restless and unstable. I just was not the type. ... The third vision of aimless wandering was on me as I had seen it" (97). So, sometimes the people did not suit her, sometimes her insides tortured her, clearly indicating that it was not merely material need or even curiosity that drove her to picaresque wanderings. She reserved for herself the choice of not staying with people she did not like and of acting upon the torments coming from the inside. She was wandering not because she was poor, but she stayed poor because she chose to wander, following primarily her internal mandates. Thus, unlike what Robey says, her wanderings are presented exactly as the process of "internalization of events" and "inner development." It is in these "picaresque" chapters that such formative experiences as fighting with her step-mother, redefining her

relationship with her father and brothers, experiencing the exhilaration of school and literature, and experiencing the forces of Jim Crow occur.

Her first "Jim Crow" experience (contrary to what she claims in the title of one of her essays), occurs in one of these picaresque chapters as well, and it is not at all a "satirical version" of the world that she describes. It happens in the chapter entitled "School Again," in which Zora finally manages to attend Howard University and to devote herself to her cherished dream of studying literature. She supports herself by working at a barber-shop, owned and operated by blacks, but catering solely to white "bankers, Senators, Cabinet Members, Congressmen, and Gentlemen of the Press" (131). One day, a man, a "Negro," came into the shop and demanded a hair-cut and shave. Obviously, he wanted to exercise his "right to be waited on wherever [he] please[d]" (135). Banks, the black manager, with the help of all the other black employees, managed to throw him out of the shop. Hurston reflects:

It was only that night in bed that I analyzed the whole thing and realized that I was giving sanction to Jim Crow, which theoretically, I was supposed to resist. But here were ten Negro barbers, three porters and two manicurists all stirred up at the threat of our living through loss of patronage. Nobody thought it out at the moment. It was an instinctive thing. That was the first time it was called to my attention that self-interest rides over all sorts of lives. ... One sees it breaking over racial, national, religious and class lines. Anglo-Saxon against Anglo-Saxon, Jew against Jew, Negro against Negro. ... Wrecking George Robinson like that on a 'race' angle would have been ironic tragedy. He always helped out any Negro who was trying to do anything progressive as far as he was able. He had no education himself, but he was for it. He would give any Howard University student a job in his shops if they could qualify, even if it was only a few hours a week. (135-6)

First, we should note that she does not report a "satirical version of the world" here at all, but, on the contrary, she reflects on her own self-interest and that of others. Second, it may seem that she gives "sanction to Jim Crow," but her argument clearly does not serve in this form any sort of racial peace or appeasement of white audiences. The

situation as perceived by Hurston can be better understood by using de Certeau's terminology. The black man demanding a hair-cut wanted an open challenge of the *strategy* of the disciplinary power-structure. His action was designed to call attention to itself, to stand face to face with the Jim Crow laws of separation. Zora's reflections, on the other hand, portray the owner, George Robinson, as a man of small tactics. He helped African American students in the little ways he could, taking advantage of the rich white patronage money. The most revealing line is: "He had no education himself, but he was for it," recalling characteristics of the mother figure of Alice Walker as described above. He did not have the strategic location (of education or integration) of becoming equal in liberty to whites, but he supported the idea of the education for others and hence furthered integration without the "enemy's" becoming aware of it. Third, the text itself does not give sanction to Jim Crow, but rather points out its divisive effects: to divide blacks for understandable reasons of self-interest. Rather than taking a clear stance on either denouncing herself and other workers in the barber shop or denouncing the black "freedom rider" fighting for his rights, Zora presents both sides of the issue, which is as likely to alienate both sides as it is to appease both sides.

As she wanders around the issue without coming down on a decisive but probably reductive "solution," she states: "[m]y business was threatened ... I could leave school and begin my wanderings again" (136). Here, she mentions wandering with a negative connotation, showing that wandering is not her goal, but rather her way of going about achieving goals. The very fact that she describes her wanderings that lasted so long is a denunciation of the Jim Crow South, not unlike that of Wright's. But her method of

emphasizing the joys and sorrows of her personal life amounts to a wandering personality that refuses to succumb to the constraints of the social order.

Robey speaks for many critics when she sees a weak Hurston in the third major "generic" part of her book, the section of essays: "On the other hand, other arguments made in the essay chapters seem calculated to appease a white audience" (Robey 676). In an interesting use of travel, Hurston points out the dangers of grouping people together and celebrates individual differences. While Wright could never get used to behaving according to the way black people were expected to behave, Hurston celebrates the fact that black people do not behave in uniform ways. In the essay, "My People, My People," she contrasts two kinds of black people traveling on a bus or a train: a "well-mannered Negro" finds "other Negroes on there with their shoes off, stuffing themselves with fried fish, bananas and peanuts, and throwing the garbage on the floor. Maybe they are not only eating and drinking. The offenders may be 'loud-talking' the place, and holding back nothing of their private lives, in a voice that embraces the entire coach" (177). This difference is embarrassing for the "well-dressed Negro" because he knows that he will be grouped with the others. Jacqueline Stewart describes how in Chicago the problem existed in the streetcars:

James Grossman points out that many black migrants ritualistically tested their new social freedoms by sitting next to a white person in a streetcar. Although for some migrants this act was a quiet, symbolic gesture of their new social standing, others were accused of making nuisances of themselves by talking too loudly and being rude to white conductors and passengers. ... Black newspapers repeatedly instructed black migrants on streetcar deportment, demonstrating its central importance as a site of interracial interaction and therefore a defining space for the public perception of the Negro. (Stewart 26)

Hurston describes the situation again in the unpublished Appendix and writes that "Certain of My People have come to dread railway day coaches for this same reason.

They dread such scenes more than they do the dirty upholstery and other inconveniences of a Jim Crow coach. They detest the forced grouping" (237). She does not "side" with one type of behavior or the other; rather, she emphasizes the need to do away with groupings. In a way, she is proud to state that the educated Negro "can do very little towards imposing his own viewpoint on the lowlier members of his race ... The performance would not only go on, it would get better with the 'dickty' Negro as the butt of all the quips" (178). They would "proceed to 'specify'" (178) or, using Gates's term, "signify," thus acting in disruptive ways in the very eyes of "disciplinary power." This is similar to de Certeau's description of tactics, which are small instances of defying the structured order in ways that cannot be controlled by the existing power structures. In de Certeau's formulation: "a migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city" (de Certeau 93). While this story may not seem like a violent fight for racial equality, Hurston's celebration of both types of behavior and denunciation of groupings can only appease the careless readers among the white audiences. Just as the well-educated African American in her story is unable to act against the "signifying" of the others, he himself signifies when he says, "My People! My People!" recalling all the folktales and cultural richness that Hurston herself has publicized. So, while she disparages groupings and says, "God made them duck by duck" (191), she celebrates the power of double-talk, the signifying of the "loud-talking" blacks, the shades of meaning of "My People!", and her own folksy way of saying, "duck by duck."

Robey disparages the essays by quoting and criticizing sentences such as: "I have no race prejudice of any kind" (231) and "Let us all be kissing-friends" (232). She speaks

for many when she criticizes the image of "a colorblind Zora" created by such statements, a Zora who seems to "overlook centuries of white hegemony" (Robey 679). She states that such statements do not serve to empower the author, but rather allow "the author's readership to shape the discursive space her utterance enters" (Robey 679). I believe that the famous sentence, "Let us all be kissing friends," must be considered in its context. This context is that of walking, time, and the dust that significantly entered the book's title:

You who play the zig-zag lightning of power over the world, with the grumbling thunder in your wake, think kindly of those who walk in the dust. And you who walk in humble places, think kindly too, of others. There has been no proof in the world so far that you would be less arrogant if you held the lever of power in your hands. Let us all be kissing-friends. Consider that with tolerance and patience, we godly demons may breed a noble world in a few hundred generations or so. Maybe all of us who do not have the good fortune to meet or meet again, in this world, will meet at a barbecue. (232)

Dust does not simply mean walking in the poverty of the earth or being lowly. It also means a sort of oblivion. It is a lack of visibility from the point of view of the lightning of power, a certain invisibility from the panoptic eyes of the observer. But Hurston also emphasizes the equality of the powerless, who would act the same way if they had had the power, hence an understanding and a "forgiveness" of the powerful are possible. "Let us all be kissing-friends" does not call for some kind of united brotherhood of people, but rather an acknowledgement of individual interests, and the acceptance of the interests of others through empathy. The context of the statement is precisely the power of those in the dust, but not a Communist-type of power (as in Wright), rather the power of the freedom of invisibility and of empathy: "There is no escape in grouping. And in practice there can be no sharp lines drawn, because the interest of every individual

in any racial group is not identical with the others. ... And why should Negroes be united? Nobody else in America is" (251).

### **Péliné: Wandering to Connect Races**

Hilda in *My Little Life* wanders around in a very special way in the Budapest of her childhood. The author places her protagonist in a multi-ethnic environment, where there is constant interaction among various races, living together in the same house, sometimes even in the same apartment, playing in the same parks and streets, going to the same movies. In this sense, her Budapest seems to be the opposite of Hurston's small-town, all-black Eatonville. Nevertheless, we shall see that Hilda's wanderings are just as provocative to race issues as the wanderings of Hurston. She appropriates this behavior to such an extent that we have to read between the lines to find a division or repression of races in the book. She connects racial places in the city and she herself becomes a connection among races. She subverts racial boundaries by becoming the connection herself.

Significantly, there are only two openly racial incidents in *My Little Life*. A look at these events is important to understand what Péliné chooses to leave out of the book in her construction of the inter-racial city. One is the above-mentioned incident of name-calling at school, in which Hilda wins the first round, but loses the battle a few years later. Though the story is not very much emphasized in the book, it is made clear that Hilda—the only one among the four authors—did not receive an education because of the racial milieu that prevailed. The other racial incident occurred when Hilda was seven years old, but—while most of the narration is chronological—this event is related only

towards the end of the book, when Péliné writes about her life as a 16-year-old. Her "leaving out" this story suggests that it was not important in her childhood, while its inclusion later seems to suggest the opposite. She tells the story of having to go with her mother to a government official in order to obtain an "affidavit of poverty" they needed in order to get free medical care. When the official saw that they were Roma, he motioned with his hand for them to stay by the door:

Well, we didn't go inside. We stood as if our feet had grown roots in the ground. My heart was in my throat, my small palm was drenched with sweat. I felt an incredible amount of disgust and hatred, and I could not react in any way other than the way I acted. Here was this young scoundrel sitting behind his desk—quite a distance from the door—and I ran over to him and spat on him. My mother made me come to my senses with a great slap, which was so powerful that my head almost fell off my skinny little body. Next, I felt my mother was pulling me away, to the outside, as if I had been a dog. (407)<sup>162</sup>

These stories together show that the city in which Hilda grew up had its own racist undercurrent. In a way similar to what Richard Wright felt when the white people disgraced him by pitting him against another black man in a fight, Hilda also understood how humiliation was used to control her inner freedom and spiritedness. As she recalls the incident, she writes: "Perhaps I ought to be ashamed of this, but now, looking back at the incident after sixty-five years, I feel a sense of pride. ... I felt that my anger was righteous" (406, 409).<sup>163</sup> Like Richard, Hilda differed from her family and friends in that the social expectations and controls "did not take" with her either. Unlike her family and like Richard Wright, she never got used to viewing racial divisions as the way things are or the way things have to be. This is why she responded with open force in the few racial

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<sup>162</sup> "Hát nem is mentünk. A lábunk a földre gyökerezett, szívem a torkomban dobogott, kis tenyerem teljesen kiverte a víz. Valami iszonyatos undort s gyűlöletet éreztem, amire nem tudtam másképp reagálni, az íróasztal mögött állt ez a nyikhaj – ami az ajtóhoz épp elég távolságra volt -, odaszaladtam és leköptem. Anyám hatalmas pofonnal térített észre, ami akkorára sikeredett, hogy a fejem majdnem leesett vézna kis testemről. Már csak azt éreztem, hogy anyám, mint a kutyát, karomnál fogva húz kifelé" (407).

<sup>163</sup> "Lehet, hogy szégyellnem kéne, de most, hogy hatvanöt év távlatából visszagondolok rá, nagyon büszke vagyok. ... Úgy éreztem, jogos volt a haragom" (406, 409).

incidents that she describes. But unlike Richard, Hilda did not perceive escape as the solution. Rather, she describes her personality as one who is blind to the racial divisions seen by others, one who travels freely back and forth among the races. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in her use of the spaces of the city she calls home. But the connection she makes among races is not limited to walking in the city; it culminates in her love that is the topic of the second part of her autobiography.

There are hints in the book to show that the racial boundaries existing in the city were very strictly internalized by the Gypsy characters, Hilda being the only exception, the one who freely wanders across racial boundaries. In order to understand her particular role among Gypsies, it is important to look at the image of the city she describes as her home. Judit Durst describes the particular function of cities for the lower classes as follows: "the public space has a special function: it is the place for the manifestation of social identity and community feeling. 'For these groups, the public space forms the venue in which they can experience their world of sub-culture'" (Durst 66).<sup>164</sup> This is indeed amply described by Péliné, for example, in the following passage:

My family went to Mátyás Square a lot. There was always something happening there. Roma women would occupy their benches early in the afternoons, watching each other, how everyone is dressed, talking about each other. They were the best at that. There is no telegraph in the world that can transmit news faster than Roma women can pass news along to each other. (162)<sup>165</sup>

Péliné emphasizes the special role of Mátyás Square for the Gypsies, along with the Józsefváros section of Budapest, throughout the book. As Durst points out, Péliné

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<sup>164</sup> "Ráadásul a társadalom alsóbb rétegei számára a nyilvános tér sajátos funkciót tölt be: a társadalmi identitás, a közösségi érzés megnyilvánulásának helyévé válik. Ezeknek a csoportoknak a számára a nyilvános tér alkotja azt a közeget, amelyen belül folyamatosan megtapasztalhatják saját szubkulturális világukat" (Durst 66).

<sup>165</sup> "Családom sűrűn járt a Mátyás térre. Itt is mindig történt valami. A roma asszonyok már délután kiültek a gyerekekkel, figyelték egymást, ki hogy van felöltözve, pletykálgodtak. Azt tudták a legjobban csinálni. Nincs a világon olyan telegráf, ami gyorsabb lenne annál, ahogyan a romák terjesztik egymás közt a híreket" (162).

describes Józsefváros as a place of safety and community feeling. It is a place of racial acceptance, where poor people of all races stick together: "Poverty somehow connected people ... Issues like Gypsy, Jew, Hungarian, were not even mentioned, we did not even think of these categories" (381).<sup>166</sup> Durst emphasizes the safety of Józsefváros within the larger city: "*Our* spaces, where we can feel safety and comfort, these spaces are endowed with special meaning, while others are avoided as being dangerous" (Durst 66).<sup>167</sup>

While Péliné describes her house and part of the city as a haven for racial peace, it becomes obvious that the squares of the city were divided between Gypsies and Hungarians. As Durst argues: "As opposed to Mátyás Square, Kálvária Square can be viewed as a metaphor for Hilda's attraction to the gadjo world and to gadjos. As Hilda—preferring to make friends with Hungarian girls—grew, she was much more attracted to Kálvária square than the Romas' Corso" (Durst 66)<sup>168</sup>. Hilda's wanderings between these squares and to other parts of the city create a connection among races that goes beyond the peaceful tolerance among poor people. While her wandering over to the gadjo square must not be viewed as an openly defiant revolutionary escape, it was nevertheless seen as strange by both her mother and the gadjo girls she chose as girlfriends: "I did not like to go the Mátyás Square at all. I preferred playing on Kálvária Square and Ludovika Square, mostly with Hungarian girls. At first they used to call me a Gypsy girl, but after I beat them up a couple of times, they have learned my real name. ... I was bored with Mátyás Square, and told my mother to go over to Kálvária Square ... My mother turned to me,

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<sup>166</sup> "Valahol a szegénység összetartotta az embereket. ... Az, hogy cigány, biboldó vagy magyar, ez nemhogy szóba nem került, de még eszünkbe se jutott" (381).

<sup>167</sup> "A 'Mi' tereink, ahol biztonságban, ismerősnek érezzük magunkat), amelyeket szimbolikus jelentéssel ruház fel, másokat meg elkerül, mert 'veszélyes helyeknek' tart (ahol az 'Ők,' az 'Idegenek' laknak)" (Durst 66).

<sup>168</sup> "A Mátyás térrel ellentétben a Kálvária tér a gádzsó világ, a gádzsókhöz való vonzódás metaforájának is tekinthető. A nagylánnyá cseperedő Hildának - aki többnyire magyar lányokkal barátkozott - ez a tér sokkal vonzóbb hely volt, mint a 'romák korzója'" (Durst 66).

angry, "Why on earth are you bored? Can't you see all the things happening here? Aren't you bored on the gadjo's square?" (162)<sup>169</sup> Hilda's fight with the Hungarian girls is an example of a violence that asserts her personality and thus is able to create new kinds of ties between the two races. Her insistence that her mother go over with her is a sign that she does not renounce one race over another, but rather connects the two.

Thus, we can say that there is a "city within the city," places and squares where Gypsies can live in racial harmony and cultural safety. But Hilda's role goes beyond this already existing city within the city, as she creates a "migrational, metaphorical city" (de Certeau) representing much more serious connections among races than what her family is used to. She does not simply enjoy the familiarity of peasants and Jews in their apartment houses or the special attention Hungarian shop-keepers pay to her pretty sisters. She wanders out of the conventional spaces and roles assigned to Gypsies as she moves over to the gadjo square, wanders out of Józsefváros, makes friends with Hungarian girls, and eventually even marries a Hungarian man.

Another small but significant example of her traversing out of both spatial and racial norms assigned to her is the time when she goes to have an audition at the Opera House. She recounts that, as an eight-year-old, "one morning, as I was playing in Kálvária Square, it occurred to me that I will go to the Opera House to study there" (110). In a venture that is unusual for an eight-year-old Gypsy girl, she asks her way around in strange and unknown parts of the city until she find the famous building of the Opera House. There, in an even more daring and defiant manner, she talks the porter into letting

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<sup>169</sup> "A Mátyás térre egyáltalán nem szerettem járni, inkább a Kálvária téren meg a Ludovika téren játszottam. Legtöbbször magyar lányokkal. Eleinte ugyan cigányoztak, de aztán, hogy jó párszor elvertem őket, igen hamar megtanulták a nevem. ... Én már nagyon untam a Mátyás teret, egyre mondogattam anyámnak, hogy menjünk már a Kálvária térre. ... Nagy mérgesen felém fordult: - Mi az anyád isteninek unatkozol, nem hallod, hogy mik történnek? A gádzsók terén nem unatkozol?" (162).

her in and gets an audition, as a man observes how she can dance: "I twisted, turned, did the splits, and threw my feet at my head in standing position. I wanted to show all I knew" (111). And indeed, unbelievable as it may sound, the Opera House offered her a chance to come back with her mother and start schooling there, in spite of her race and poverty. The story ends there. Her parents, probably not believing that such an opportunity could happen to them, never took her back to the Opera House: "I will never be a dancer. My mother did not take me to the Opera House, and I was not allowed to talk about this in front of my father" (114). This story shows the small steps, in fact, tactics, made by Hilda. She did not achieve any miraculous turning point. She did not rebel against her parents. But she did traverse racial and class boundaries, exhibiting her abilities and strength. Using de Certeau's terminology, she wins "isolated actions," "blow by blow:" once when she gave a literal blow to the girls at school, and once in her appearance at the Opera House. As we have seen, even though her regular schooling had to stop and her training at the Opera could not even begin, her person represents strength and proves that there are possibilities that her family members cannot even think of.

Because of her insistence upon play and imagination rather than work, her mother called her a "peasant" girl, a term equivalent (and sometimes also used on her) to calling her a *gadjo*. So, her waywardness, her wandering and dreaming lifestyle is perceived by her mother as a sign of being out of her race, of being somewhat between the races or above races, defying the internalized racial boundaries. One time, for example, her mother called her a peasant girl because she was "out in the streets and squares." In an ironic reversal of the traditional image of the traveling Gypsy, the mother says Hilda was

"thrown from a gadjo's carriage," referring to her wayward personality but unconsciously pointing out how her personality breaks down traditional racial lines:

I was most of the time with Kamilla, she being the sister closest to me in age. My other siblings were grown up, and they did not like to play. I was the one crazy about playing. All day, I was out in the streets and squares. When we set out for the streets with Kamilla, my mother always told me: 'You, peasant girl, keep your eye on Kamilla, hold her hand and don't let her fall. Keep your mind on her, because you are a bad peasant girl. I don't know who you are like. If I didn't know that Lajos Feres fucked me for you, I'd think you were thrown from a gadjo's carriage.' (142)<sup>170</sup>

Her personal relationships mirror her wanderings. While there were regular contacts between members of her family and gadjo people, Hilda breaks down the existing boundaries. Gadjo people came to their apartment and talked with their mother, gadjo men turned their heads to look at her sisters, but serious friendship and romantic association were unheard of. Péliné describes two gadjo women who used to drink coffee with her mother: "They kept in touch with us, and we with them. Even though we were Roma and they were gadjo, this did not mean any antagonism on either side. We did not argue about race issues with any of the other people either" (267).<sup>171</sup> Concealed between the lines is that there *were* race issues, which they chose not to talk about. Hilda's attention to other races is much more open, for example, she looks at gadjo boys in uniform. Her sister rebukes her, saying: "You speak crazy. ... I like to be courted by Roma boys. And make sure you don't tell mother how much you like these boys in uniform because she will get angry with you and will not let us come here again"

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<sup>170</sup> "Kamillával voltam legtöbbet, korban ő volt hozzám a legközelebb. A többi testvéreim már mind felnőttek voltak, meg nem is szerettek játszani, én voltam az eszeveszett játékos. Egész nap az utca és a tér volt a mindenem, Kamillával, ha elindultunk az utcára, anyám elkezdte mondókáját: "Te parasztlány, a két szemed Kamillán legyen, fogd a kezét, és el ne engedd, nehogy elessen, az eszed ott legyen, mert igen rossz parasztlány vagy. Nem tudom, kire ütöttél, ha nem tudnám, hogy a Fejes Lajos kúrt nekem, akkor azt hinném, hogy egy gádszó dobott le a kocsijáról" (142).

<sup>171</sup> "Ők is ragaszkodtak hozzánk, mi is hozzájuk. Pedig mi romák voltunk ők meg gádszók, de ez semmivéle ellentétet nem váltott ki egyikünkől sem. A többi magyar lakóval sem volt faji kérdésről vitánk" (267).

(210).<sup>172</sup> We can see the mother's serious disapproval of her relationships with gadjos, while Hilda openly expresses her inter-racial interests: "And I said that I would never go to the Gypsy ball. My mother was angry with me and said that I probably wanted to go to the Gadjo ball" (192).<sup>173</sup>

## Conclusion

Descriptions of how majority societies function are inseparable from descriptions of the protagonists' methods of resistance. Among the various societies described and the various responses to them, there is one thing in common: resistance in all four books has to resort to indirect actions, mostly the tactics of the weak. Wright portrays the overbearing discrimination present in his society, as well as the modes of behavior expected of black people. Richard himself becomes a unique character in his unwillingness, even inability, to behave according to the rules and disciplines dictated by the white majority. In that sense, he resembles those exceptional African Americans who had attempted to escape slavery, and his book resembles the structure of slave narratives in many ways. However, there are several reasons why Wright's situation is different: his life is not directly controlled by an overseer with a whip in his hand, but is indirectly controlled by white expectations and random violence; family and friends are not forcibly separated as in the time of slavery, but even their personal lives are made largely impossible by constant experiences of fear, trauma, and poverty; and while the North offers prospects for Richard, he knows that the racial tensions he experiences cannot be

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<sup>172</sup> "De bolondokat beszélsz. ... Hát képzeld , én roma fiúval szeretek udvaroltatni, és ha hazaérünk, ne kezd mesélni anyámnak, hogy mennyire tetszenek neked ezek a ludovikás csávók, mert megint méregbe hozod, és akkor nem jöhetünk többet ide sem" (210).

<sup>173</sup> "Sőt, azt mondtam, hogy én soha nem fogok cigánybálba menni. Még ezért veszekedett is velem az anyám meg a család, hogy én biztos a gádzsóbálba fogok menni" (192).

escaped. Thus, one of the book's central organizing themes is a desire to escape, but the book constantly calls attention to the fact that there can be no escape similar to the slave's escape into freedom. This movement in *Black Boy* is rather replaced by a "restless movement," a mostly futile movement trying to survive, avoid racial violence, and, in Richard's case, following his dream of becoming a writer. Unlike slave narratives, his purpose is not to inform and persuade white readers, but rather to describe the conditions of African Americans through his fictionalized autobiography. The society Lakatos describes is similarly dangerous and incalculable. His people are confined into ghettos, being subject to disease, poverty, and ignorance inside, while suffering from racial attacks and random violence outside. Boncza's movements are directed towards defying these social constraints in two ways: his wanderings celebrate an extinct traditional lifestyle and self-respect, while his life in the city amounts to an attempt to break out of ghetto life. Hurston describes her wanderings in order to claim a freedom that may or may not be hers. Rather than openly confronting her society, even in the case of black barbers' not being able to attend to a black customer, Hurston looks for the little possibilities of freedom and opportunity. In that sense, her book is a celebration of the tactics of the weak. Péliné does not deny racial differences and racial discrimination in her society. But she, like Hurston, decides to largely ignore race issues and racial divisions. This is not a naïve escape into a dream world, but rather a very active attempt on her part to create unlikely connections and celebrate unlikely cultural encounters.

## Conclusion

In my dissertation, I made some unusual comparisons between autobiographical narratives from the Hungarian Roma and the African American traditions. My purpose was to use the relatively rich literary scholarship available on African American literature for a better understanding of the much less researched Gypsy literature in Hungary. In both traditions, I chose two very different works, thus calling attention to the complexities of each cultural and literary tradition in itself. Among African American authors, Wright and Hurston have been called opposites because of their very different approaches to issues of race, politics, culture, and gender. Lakatos and Péliné are also strikingly different because of their differences in gender, cultural backgrounds, views on minority issues, and styles of writing. In this way, my comparative study of these narratives became a four-way analysis, in which I compared and contrasted four autobiographies that describe in their own unique ways very different cultural and racial experiences as well as widely disparate responses to these.

Throughout my study, my basic methodology was to make comparisons among the texts based on topics and features common to all four narratives. The common elements of emphasis on the mother characters, descriptions of homes, accounts of violence, and portrayals of ways of resistance formed the clear ground upon which I built my comparisons and contrasts. In this way, I never wandered far from the worlds these authors present in their narratives. In some instances, I pointed out contradictions in passages to show how certain descriptions in these texts go against the grain of what the main text is saying. Calling attention to these textual inconsistencies, I attempted to show hitherto unnoticed complexities and contradictions in the texts and in the subject

positions of the narrators. I also described social, political, and gender issues present in the narratives, but I stopped short of making general observations or conclusions that would go beyond a study in comparative literature and into the realm of sociology, gender studies, or other disciplines.

I used the expression "multiple subject positions" to call attention to the fact that the positions of the authors in their respective minority and majority societies were in themselves complex. In my formulation of the subject positions, I made use of the "insider/outsider" distinction to point out the precarious positions of the narrator-protagonists, who belong to their minority cultures but are distanced from these by virtue of education and social position. I carefully showed, through textual analysis, that the insider position of each writer is itself a complex and multi-faceted situation. I shed light on this situation by studying relationships with mothers, families, and homes, as well as the narrative structures of the books. Similarly, the outsider positions are also different in each case, made complicated by the intricate life situation and social position of each writer. Thus, since both the insider and the outsider positions were themselves shown to be complex and problematic, I did not set up a binary opposition between them.

However, the realities of the social situations described in the books mean that each writer's basic experience was belonging to two social groups: the minority community and the majority society. The authors of my study even chose to stress this duality in order to emphasize their messages about minority issues. For example, Lakatos purposefully avoided talking about the various cultural groups of the Roma, thus emphasizing the binary opposition between the Roma as an oppressed minority group and the oppressive majority society. Wright emphasizes the opposition between blacks and

whites, and his views were influenced by Communist ideologies on class struggle. A central element of his narrative is the North/South distinction in the United States, but he "deconstructs" this opposition to show the pervasiveness of the black/white contrast. Péliné mentions many other minority groups besides her Gypsy community in her attempt to avoid characterizing her society as polarized by binary opposition. Nevertheless, she also describes her own life as being played out between two cultural groups, the Gypsy minority and gadjo majority. Hurston discusses the color-line in order to develop her ideas concerning the "irrelevance" of races.

I arrived at the formulation of insider/outsider positions, with both positions being problematized in themselves, through several different analyses. In the chapters and subsections in Part I, I came to this conclusion through close readings of the characterizations of the mothers and the descriptions of the homes. But I also studied the unusual features of the narrative structures in each book to formulate this position. These various lines of argument all led to the same conclusion, through which I emphasized the significance of multiple subject positions as well as those features of the narratives that make them autoethnographies. Thus, the simple formulation of insider/outsider refers to several involved analyses that establish the narrators' complex relationships to their own cultures. Besides, it also refers to the generic form of the narratives, suggesting that the existing scholarship on autoethnographies can help in further understanding these books.

In line with these considerations, my emphasis on motherhood at the beginning of the dissertation served to show the problematized positions of the narrators as insiders to their cultures. It showed the complexities of life within the minority groups themselves. I chose this approach because issues of motherhood are emphatic in all four narratives and

because these issues seem to be readily understandable to readers of various cultural backgrounds. In choosing this approach, I did not essentialize the mothers; on the contrary, I called attention to the narrators' complicated relationships to their backgrounds. In some cases, the mother characters represent cultural values, but I also provided many examples where the roles of the mother characters are very different. We can make a distinction based on gender differences here, where the mother characters in Hurston and Péliné stand for cultural values, but the mother characters of Wright and Lakatos call attention to political and racial issues. But even this distinction must be problematized, as none of the four mother characters stands for just one thing. My point throughout was that all four authors describe complex and problematic relationships with the mothers, and these relationships point beyond themselves, to the problematic relationships with the protagonists' own minority societies. Wright's mother does not represent minority culture, but Richard's relationship with her says much about his attitude towards African Americans. In Hurston's case, I called attention to the mother's own ambivalence towards some folk traditions. Péliné's mother character is also unique, as she stands in opposition to other Roma women on many issues (for example, the mother's unusually open attitude towards gadjos). In Lakatos's case, I also mentioned the mother's contradictory attitude towards some "religious" traditions while being unusually "progressive" in other areas, such as her emphasis on education.

The particular characterization of Richard's mother in *Black Boy* sheds light on the way I made use of the mother characters for a better understanding of the narratives. Though the character of the mother is basically a negative character—who shares features of monstrosity with the grandmother, the aunt, and even the uncles—I was careful not to

conflate all female relatives. I showed that there are slight but significant differences between the mother and other relatives. This difference is not simply the mother's support of Richard's education or his pity for her. She belongs to a church that is significantly less repressive than the grandmother's, she takes Richard's sides several times against the grandmother's repression, she is patient and playful in some of her dealings with Richard, and there are many other examples proving her different character. While Richard's feeling towards his grandmother is open hatred, his feelings are at least ambivalent towards his mother. His feelings towards his mother are an ever-changing mixture of hatred, pity, understanding, and attachment. The study of Richard's relationship with his mother helped in understanding the social, historical, and ideological background of his writing. While the extreme monstrosity of the grandmother shows the devastating effects of racism, the strength and unity of her hateful personality overshadows the understanding of racial oppression's effects on weaker but more average personalities. In other words, the hatred her character elicits in Richard and in the reader does not allow a thorough understanding of what probably made her the way she is. The more complex representation of the mother—including her violent harshness, her often positive attitudes towards Richard, her attempts at finding good jobs, her weakness, her poverty, and her broken family life—allowed the presentation of actual social circumstances that resulted in shaping her character the way she was. Because there are some good and sincere characteristics of the mother, the reader's attention is called to the circumstances that still made her character negative.

I described the positions of these authors as being educated professional artists. With this formulation, I emphasized the authors' special positions of being both educated

and artists (with the exception of Péliné, who did not have a formal education). This position is very different from being simply educated. While education often means upward mobility (an expression I avoided because of its possible suggestion that one social position is "above" the other) and some sort of integration into society at large (assimilation is out of question in the cases I study), an educated member of the minority does not typically report on his or her own minority background. Education carries with it some insight into oppression and alternative social possibilities, and I argued that it also brings about a different approach to one's own minority culture. And being an artist (at least in the case of these authors) entails representing minority life from this unique position. These authors, while being educated, also turned their attention to their minority cultures or backgrounds. This position is also very different from the position of an uneducated artist, such as the homespun artist mother of Alice Walker. While both Wright and Hurston wrote their autobiographies primarily geared towards an African American audience, their established positions as famous authors by the time of their writing also made it certain that people of other ethnic groups would also read their works. Lakatos and Péliné wrote primarily to inform the majority society about the lives of Gypsies; nevertheless, their narratives are very important for the Roma readers as well. Thus, although I did not study in detail the intended audiences of these narratives, it is important that all four books address a wide range of audiences.

In my study of the narrators' relationships to their minority cultures, I made use of some ideas by Alice Walker. Her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" formulates the cultural and artistic heritage of mothers. These ideas are particularly useful in studying the roles of mothers in the female narratives, where the emphasis tends to be on

the domestic cultural heritage as the background to the writing careers of the daughters. Wright's mother does not stand for domestic culture or art, and in the case of Lakatos, the emphasis is not on that. With the help of Walker's formulations, I also explained the importance of the difference between the art of the mothers and the art of the daughters. While the artistic heritage the daughters received from their mothers (and other ancestors) is very important in shaping their art, we must also be aware that their art is very different from this heritage by virtue of its being practiced professionally and being influenced by many other factors (for example, the majority culture's expectations and cultural productions).

In light of these considerations, I used Walker's short story "Everyday Use" to better understand the special position of the narrators as educated professional writers. This short story, together with its commentaries, helped in understanding this special position—a much less gender-specific issue than the question of domestic art. All four writers report on their families and social backgrounds years after having exchanged these backgrounds for new positions in society. This analysis did not primarily concentrate on the folk heritage from which these writers might have drawn inspiration, but rather on the situation of being torn between the effects of social advancement and the various emotions elicited by contacts with one's background. My readings of the unusual narrative structure of Walker's short story concentrated on the various ways of voicing an emotionally loaded (be they positive or negative emotions) relationship to one's background while at the same time maintaining a distance of objectivity, making the writings accessible to readers of various backgrounds.

My dissertation opened in Part I with the most private realm of the representations of the relationships with the mothers, going on to the "wider" aspect of the homes and home communities, following in this way the logic of my argument and the chronological logic of life narratives. In Part II, I moved on to relationships with the majority cultures: I first studied representations of violence and then descriptions of resistance to other forms of repression. Based on the understanding of the private spaces and private experiences in Part I, I showed how violence and other forms of discrimination enter even this space. There are differences among the four books as to the extent and type of this private realm. My argument was that there is such a private space and that it affects the lives of the protagonists to varying degrees and in various ways. In what follows, I will briefly describe my findings in the four chapters of my dissertation. I do not make general conclusions about gender differences, but I do call attention to the very different situations and writings of each of the four authors, making comparisons and contrasts. Doing this, I make several observations about what is similar in the two female narratives as opposed to the two male narratives. This is particularly emphasized in my last chapter, where I studied responses to repression, and I emphasized how Hurston and Péliné share certain ways of responding that are different from those of Lakatos and Wright.

The minority writers of my study reach very different positions concerning cultural memory. In my analysis of the mother characters in the narratives, I found that the two female authors, Hurston and Péliné, portray their mothers as representing cultural values and traditions. The daughters' complex and sometimes contradictory relationships to their mothers highlight their similarly complicated and burdened relationships to their cultures. On the one hand, both authors describe the richness and values of the past, but

on the other hand, their lifestyles distance them from these traditional forms of culture. Both Hurston and Péliné shape their own artistic endeavors by building on the traditions of the cultural memories represented by the mothers, but also change this cultural heritage into written forms of art for larger audiences. The two male authors, Wright and Lakatos, do not portray their mothers as prime representatives of cultural values of the past. Their portrayals of their own complicated relationships with the mother characters have social and political overtones rather than artistic and cultural ones. They call attention to their difficult positions of trying to come to terms with family backgrounds and childhoods marred by the pains of discrimination and poverty. Wright attempts to come to terms with his own traumatic experiences of childhood by turning to reading and writing fiction. His desire to become a writer is formulated very early in life, and he lays importance on education as a means of achieving this goal. The structure of the book itself reflects the importance of fiction, as the only breaks from the accounts of traumatic experiences are the few poetic insertions. The slight differences he makes between portrayals of his mother and other family members call attention to the complexity of his views concerning the effects of racial discrimination on personalities and relationships. Lakatos sees a rupture between the distant past of wandering Gypsy lifestyle and the harsh realities of the present. His portrayal of the contradictions in his mother calls attention to this rupture and to the significance of education in trying to overcome the resulting cultural vacuum.

In all four books, the narrators describe the lives of their minority groups with the knowledge and emotional involvement of an insider, as well as the additional viewpoint of an educated outsider. All four authors write their works as educated professional artists

(though Péliné did not have any formal education), thus occupying very different positions in their societies from those of their families. Without being assimilated, they certainly write from positions of some acquaintance with the majority societies. This double position reflects the social realities of their lives, since they all find themselves living between two distinct social groups. In this way, the narratives of my study can be called autoethnographies, revealing not only the authors' personal experiences of being between the cultures, but, just as importantly, their complex experiences within the cultural groups of their origins. However, there is a marked difference between the male and female writers' experiences and descriptions of this special position. Hurston and Péliné emphasize friendly relationships with members of the majority society and formulate criticisms towards individuals of both the minority and majority groups. This can be considered a special way of claiming equal treatment and equal judgment of minorities. Wright and Lakatos stress the difficulties of this dual position, that accentuates rather than lessens the contrast between the minority and majority groups. While they are both well-versed in the majority cultures, they do not see this position as a connection between races but rather as a way towards greater awareness of the nature of oppression. They see their own special positions as something that equips them to fight oppression.

In the second part of my dissertation, I studied the racial and political issues related to contacts between the oppressed minority and oppressive majority cultures. One significant common element of the four narratives is that they were all written by members of oppressed racial minorities; thus encounters with the majority societies are marked by violence, oppression, and discrimination in all cases. Nevertheless, there is a

difference between the female narratives' and the male narratives' representations of these encounters. Hurston and Péliné do not emphasize the implications of oppression as much as Lakatos and Wright do. In my study of violence, I found that Wright portrays violence as penetrating all aspects of minority life. In this way, he calls attention to the fact that racial discrimination and oppression are not limited to public places or actual inter-cultural encounters but affect the entirety minority lives. Lakatos also portrays widespread violence in his book. Similarly to Wright, Lakatos emphasizes the all-encompassing nature of discrimination and oppression. One way Lakatos conveys this message is the distinction he makes between intra-racial and inter-racial violence. He considers the former a part of life that can solve and settle problems, but he portrays the latter as an unjust way of propagating racial oppression. In stark contrast to the male narratives, Hurston's narrative does not emphasize violence as part of her everyday experience of racial oppression. She includes some violent scenes in her book to show that, in spite of the existence of racial oppression, she claims to be able to live a life that is mostly unaffected by racial expectations. Without denying the devastating effects of racism and discrimination, Hurston emphasizes the responsibility of both races to try to overcome their historic problems. Similarly to Hurston, Péliné's emphasis is not on the violence of inter-racial relationships. She includes violent scenes in her narrative to show her personal integrity even in the face of real discrimination and oppression.

My chapter on the more covert forms of repression and resistance also points to different attitudes among the four books, with some significant differences between the male and female narratives. Restless movement is one way to formulate responses to repression in all four books. But this movement takes very different shapes, calling

attention to the different notions of possible resistance and different political situations. Wright's message is that there is no escape from racial discrimination; moving to the North does not solve problems. Thus, while his book largely follows the structure of slave narratives, it also calls attention to the significant changes in race relations since then. Discrimination has become more subtle but also more prevalent. Lakatos's movements are contrasted both to the Gypsy wanderings of the distant past and to the current lives of Gypsies in enclosures. The underlying notion is that the former lifestyle is not available while the latter is not satisfying for him. He can only attain some amount of freedom by appropriating some of the lifestyle of the majority society, most importantly by getting an education. The wanderings of the female writers, as opposed to the male ones, are not a way of attempting to fight oppression, but rather show the importance of small possibilities of freedom found even in oppressive societies. Hurston's wanderings seem to be tactics to claim and prove her own personal freedom. Péliné describes her wanderings as part of her intentional disregard for racial expectations, thus proving her ability to cross racial boundaries considered impenetrable by most.

The narratives of Wright, Hurston, Lakatos, and Péliné demonstrate marked differences. In their very different ways, Wright and Hurston both describe African American experiences in the Jim Crow South. Their situations are clearly very different from the social realities of Gypsy experiences in the Hungary of the 1930s. But there are some aspects of their writings where gender differences are just as marked as cultural differences. In some ways, the responses of Wright and Lakatos can be compared in contrast to those of Hurston and Péliné. The complexities and contradictions I also pointed out within the narratives of each of these four authors allow the making of

multiple comparisons among them. I offer these sometimes unlikely comparisons in the hope of initiating a dialogue about the complicated nature of minority experiences.

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## Curriculum Vitae

### Education:

Distance-Learning Tutor Certificate  
Pannon University  
Budapest  
1999

MA in Comparative Literature  
Rutgers Graduate School  
New Brunswick, NJ  
1997

BA with Highest Honors in Computer Science and English  
Rutgers College, Rutgers University  
New Brunswick, NJ  
1991

### Selected Work Experience:

English Language Teacher (2010 - )  
Katedra Language School  
Esztergom, Hungary

Assistant to the Manager (2008 – 2010)  
Manréza Hotel and Retreat Center  
Pilisszentkereszt-Dobogókő, Hungary

Teacher of English in secondary school (part time) (2003 - 2006)  
Ward Mária School  
Piliscsaba, Hungary

Instructor of English Language and Literature (1998 - 2009)  
Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Department of English,  
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Lecturer in Computer Science, English, and Spanish language (1996 - 2000)  
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Programmer (1991 - 1994)  
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**Publications:**

"Salinger a Jézus-imáról: Franny és Zooey." *A Szív*, April 2010. 32-34.

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