The Double Consciousness in Richard Wright’s 
*Native Son* and Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*

Dong-In Cho

I.

The boundaries of class and gender, and the stifling of expressive communication serves ideological purposes in the power structure, even today. What W. E. B. DuBois called the “race line” still remains one of the most powerful tools of oppression. When the tools are connected with the boundaries, they can dehumanize the marginalized people.

Charles Murray and the late Richard Hernstein created a furor in the United States with their publicized book *The Bell Curve*, a study concerning the relationship between intelligence and genetics. The implications of this study for educational policies in regard to race are ominous. As journalist Mark Bowden claims, the book “concludes flatly that African Americans, on average, are significantly less intelligent than whites” (20). Murray and Hernstein’s recommendations regarding the “social problem” in the interpretation of genetics—a scientific analogy for “the social problems of race”—include dismantling of “the nation’s affirmative action programs. They also suggest that “social policies ought to promote births among the smart and discourage births among the dull” (Bowden 21). However, Bowden points out that we cannot gage “the mechanism of genius or stupidity. He also argues that “science cannot tell us, except in broad outline, how the brain works” (20).

Further emphasizing the ambiguity of the term “intelligence,” Bowden maintains that the mind and state of being human are more complex than quantifiable measures can possibly apprehend:

> Part experience, part inheritance, intelligence: is a construct, a notion, something we infer only by how well we perform on tests. And those who know the most about the test, and the brain, tend to be the most cautious about what IQ really means. (20)

The *Bell Curve* and the debate which followed in the media and in academic circles reinforce the insidious deportment of racial prejudice in this country. To give credence to the culturally biased IQ, which tells us nothing about real-life skill, action, or ethics, is to rationale the power of the privileged class.

DuBois’s prediction that the race line would be the problem of the twentieth century was accurate. Bowden describes the cycle of racist and class bias put to practice through IQ testing, arguing “it denigrates many blacks to poverty” (20).

The creed that *The Bell Curve* advocates through its scientific study of intelligence has a historical basis not only in slavery, but in mid-nineteenth century legislation declaring it illegal to teach persons of African descent to read in certain Southern States.

This study explores how *The Bell Curve*’s premises come to play with the literary characters in *Native Son* and *Tar Baby* so as to underscore the absurdity of culturally produced claims that attempt to quantifying human and that attempt to make “bell curves” or rubrics of all our shifting human mysteries. Considering these questions,
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