

“The dumber I behave, the richer I get”: Literary Post-Truth, Positivism, and *American Fiction* (2023)

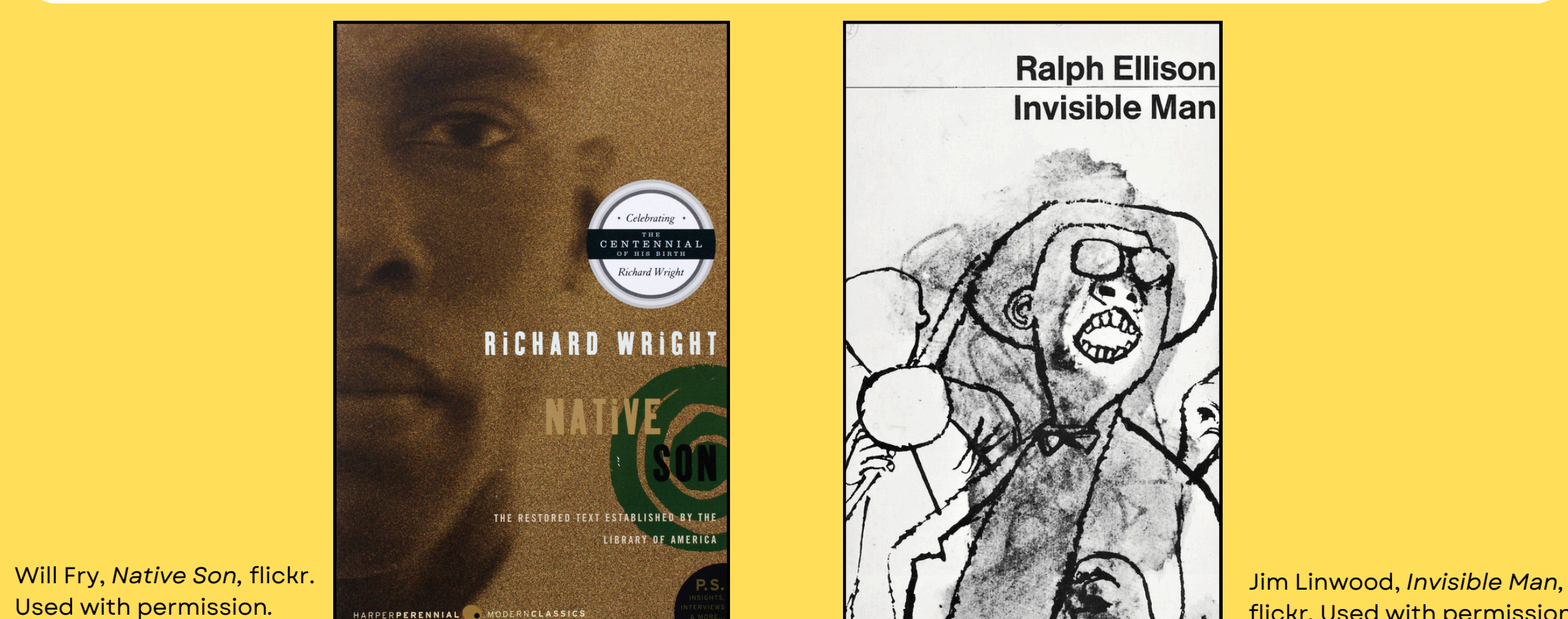


Jordan Price | Supervised by Dr. Christopher Douglas | Department of English, University of Victoria | March 2025

The literary imagination can **go against** those forms of positivist truth-telling that **inspired social change**, from abolition to Black Lives Matter, and instead participate in the **post-truth epistemic crisis**.

Why American Literature, Now?

- An adaptation of Percival Everett’s novel *Erasure* (2001), *American Fiction* (2023) is an Academy Award-winning film **dealing with the construction of race in American literature**.
- The film has been celebrated for its depiction of **modern race relations** (Nicholson), but critics have yet to show the **literary dimensions** of the film.
- *American Fiction* is linked to a **longstanding** literary tradition: the **burden of representation**.
 - Since modernism, authors like **Ralph Ellison** and **Richard Wright** have debated how to best represent black experience in America.
- *American Fiction* visualizes the debate in Trump-era America by drawing attention to post-truth, the “deliberate strategy . . . where **objective facts** are **less influential** in shaping public opinion” (Bufacchi 350).



Will Fry, *Native Son*, flickr. Used with permission.

Jim Linwood, *Invisible Man*, flickr. Used with permission.

Post-Truth

- Post-truth emerges in scholarly discourse after Donald Trump’s 2016 election (Bufacchi 350).
- In Marxist parlance, it creates “**false consciousness**” - an epistemological issue where objective truth claims are less appreciable and valued (Mejia et al. 112).
- Post-truth is linked with **American neofascism** (Giamario 129).
- Post-truth is **postmodern**, reaching back to Jacques Derrida’s theory of “**free play**” and Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the “**hyperreal**” (Hussain 153-157).
- Liberal “anti-fascists” seek to oppose post-truth by rekindling “a culture of **empirical truth-telling**,” such as fact-checking, that **confronts far-right misinformation** (Giamario 129).

Positivism and Social Change

- If anti-post-truth involves “empirical truth-telling” (Giamario 129), racialized people in America have **engaged in these efforts for at least the past two centuries**.
- Struggles for equality and liberation have been rooted in **positivism** - i.e., that **racial injustice is objective, appreciable, and empirical**.
 - As Teresa Goddu explains, struggles for emancipation in 19th-century America were based on a “**rational presentation of factual evidence**” (31).
- Photography is one such example; circa 1840, enslaved people in the American South commissioned photographic portraits that showed their **inherent humanity and dignity**, as well as the **evil of enslavement** (Fox-Amato 6-7).
 - As **observable, fact-based** visual records, these portraits were shared in mass media to help **mobilize the abolitionist movement** (Fox-Amato 2-3).
- In America, black **literature** also linked **personal and objective, scholarly knowledge**.
 - Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) is both **autobiographical and historical**.
 - W.E.B. Du Bois’ theories, like “double-consciousness,” are rooted in **his personal experience** (Itzigsohn and Brown 232-236).
- In 2020, the global outcry after the death of George Floyd was brought about because of this **positivist approach to injustice**.
 - Floyd’s violent arrest and his immortal words - “**I can’t breathe**” - were **captured on camera** and shared worldwide via social media, bearing witness to an **empirical and observable** example of structural racism.



Chad Davis, *George Floyd Mural*, flickr. Used with permission.

Literary Post-Truth in *American Fiction*

- While racial justice has been an anti-post-truth project, the literary work in *American Fiction* **contradicts these cultures of truth-telling**.
- In the film, Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, a burnt-out college professor and writer, faces challenges when his erudite works **undersell** compared to the hack writer, Sintara Golden, and her **trite, pandering** novels that are replete with **reductive tropes** about black people.
 - Monk abhors that Sintara’s work is lauded as “**painfully real**” and “**urgent**” by literary critics (00:34:12).
- Frustrated, Monk pens a hastily written and stereotype-riddled book, *My Pafology* - a novel about poverty and fatherlessness that spuriously attests to “**the true story of what it’s like to be a black man in America**” (01:20:29) - under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh, a fictive author supposedly in prison.
 - Monk then becomes a **national literary giant**.
- Monk’s and Sintara’s novels are **completely deceitful**; the authors have never experienced the challenges displayed in their work.
 - Monk’s **real** struggles - his **embodied truth** - are **familial**; his problematic father has committed suicide, his sister has passed away, and his mother has been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s.
- White readers and critics **perceive Monk’s dishonest novel as truth**; a publisher remarks that the story is “raw,” “real,” and “based on” Stagg’s “actual life” (00:49:40).
 - Post-truth falsities **pervade** the literary community in the film.
- Monk laments that works like *My Pafology* “**aren’t real**,” submitting that these stereotypes “flatten” and “reduce” the lives of black people (01:22:40).
- Monk and Sintara are not inspired by authentic artistry but by **market capitalism** and softening white guilt (01:38:18).
 - As Monk’s agent remarks: “White people **think they want the truth, but they don’t**; they just want to feel absolved” (00:41:34).



AFP, *Oscar Nominees in Main Categories*, Free Malaysia Today. Used with permission.

Conclusion

- In Trump-era America, literary creation can **oppose** positivist movements that fought for justice in the US.
- *American Fiction* illuminates a post-truth literary culture that obfuscates the **lived, objective space** of the self.
- The film puts an **onus** on literary circles to reinforce a posteriori forms of **truth-telling**.

References

- *American Fiction*. Directed by Cord Jefferson, T-Street Productions, 2023.
- Bufacchi, Vittorio. “Truth, Lies and Tweets: A Consensus Theory of Post-Truth.” *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2021, pp. 347-61.
- Fox-Amato, Matthew. “Introduction.” *Exposing Slavery: Photography, Human Bondage, and the Birth of Modern Visual Politics in America*, Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 1-17.
- Giamario, Patrick T. “The Social Critic as Liar: Wilde, Adorno, and the Crisis of Post-Truth Politics.” *Theory & Event*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2023, pp. 128-53.
- Goddu, Teresa A. “Summing Up Slavery: The Antislavery Almanac and the Production of Fact.” *Selling Antislavery: Abolition and Mass Media in Antebellum America*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020, pp. 31-54.
- Hussain, Amina. “Theorising Post-Truth: A Postmodern Phenomenon.” *Journal of Comparative Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2019, pp. 150-62.
- Itzigsohn, José, and Karida Brown. “Sociology and the Theory of Double Consciousness: W. E. B. Du Bois’s Phenomenology of Racialized Subjectivity.” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2015, pp. 231-48.
- Mejia, Robert, et al. “White Lies: A Racial History of the (Post)Truth.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2018, pp. 109-26.
- Nicholson, Amy. “‘American Fiction’ Review: The Pen Is Mighty, the Pressures Mightier.” *New York Times*, 13 December, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/14/movies/american-fiction-review.html>

Acknowledgements

- This research was supported by the Jamie Cassels Undergraduate Research Awards, University of Victoria.
- My deepest gratitude to Dr. Christopher Douglas for his expertise and support.