

## **Racialized Blindness in Native Son**

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Native Son by Richard Wright is a heart-rending exposé of the racial oppression that permeated Chicago (and the rest of America) during the 1930s. Through the experiences of his black protagonist Bigger Thomas, Wright provides invaluable insights into the origins of racial segregation and the tragic ways in which it affected American society. Throughout the novel, Wright insists that Bigger was not born a violent criminal. He is a 'native son': a product of the violence and racism that suffused the devastating social conditions in which he was raised. By no means does Wright downplay the oppression of blacks by whites, but he does demonstrate that much of the racial inequality was due to the profound lack of understanding, among both blacks and whites, of the other social group. Bigger's misunderstanding of whites binds him to a self-fulfilling prophecy, insofar as he behaves according to what he believes is his racial destiny.

Bigger Thomas's story represents a key development in black American literature. Its profound impact is illustrated by letters written by readers to Richard Wright, which are now housed in the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library. This essay analyzes racialized blindness in both the black and white communities in Native Son by comparing the racial attitudes observed in the book with those expressed by readers in their mail to Wright.

The collection at Beinecke includes letters from readers all across the United States, written between 1940 and 1975. Almost all the letters are written by white readers, who share meaningful personal experiences and observations about the racial situation in

mid-19<sup>th</sup> century America. The feelings expressed in the letters confirm Wright's notion that blacks and whites have had a pervasive misunderstanding of each other's perceptions and culture. Most of the letters convey sadness and sympathy about the prevalence of racism in America, but some demonstrate racism or a blatant denial of the adversities of African American life.

In Native Son, racism is inescapable. Bigger is painfully aware that he is socially handicapped by his black skin, and articulates his frustrations when he says, "Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't It's just like living in jail" (20). Bigger and his friends know that policemen never search diligently for blacks that commit crimes against other blacks, yet they terrorize and publicly shame blacks that commit crimes against whites. Wright movingly describes the racially oppressive character of the education and law enforcement systems in Chicago, and how "black people, even though they cannot get good jobs, pay twice as much rent as whites for the same kinds of flats" (248). Mr. Dalton's private investigator Britten epitomizes this racism. Bigger is not wrong when he concludes that "the hard light in Britten's eyes held him guilty because he was black" (162), and Britten confirms this when he states, "To me, a nigger's a nigger. They don't need a chance if you ask me, they get in enough trouble without it" (163). Sadly, this attitude towards blacks was not uncommon.

One of the most poignant examples of racism in the novel is the sensationalist article titled NEGRO RAPIST FAINTS AT INQUEST featured in the *Tribune*. In the article, Bigger is described as looking "exactly like an ape" (279), with "exceedingly

black skin” (279) and a lower jaw that “protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beast” (279). The article viciously accuses Bigger of raping Mary (an accusation which, although false, is corroborated in Bigger’s trial due to a cruel association of black men with rape crimes), and then proceeds to explain how increased segregation, limited education for blacks and an “injection of an element of constant fear” (281) form the solution to the “problem” (281) of Negroes in America. Wright also criticizes the media for slandering Communists and Jews, and shows how the newspapers gave Bigger the idea to frame Jan in the ransom note by signing it ‘Red’. In general, the newspapers in Native Son serve as yet another illustration of how deeply entrenched racism was in American society in the 1930s.

Many readers communicate sadness and regret concerning the prominence and terrible consequences of racism in America. For example, Bruce McGavren writes:

*Native Son, in particular, has made my heart and conscience ache – as a human being, as a Christian, as a white man, and as an American. Your book, and others, has filled me with a deep sense of shame and guilt for the inhuman and ruthless exploitation and brutal treatment of the Negro people and for the continuing denial of those rights which church and state so vigorously proclaim to be the right of every man.*<sup>1</sup>

Jean Cooper expresses similar sentiments, as follows:

*If a Negro commits a crime of any kind, you hear about it months after, and yet if a white person does the same thing you read about it once – then the next day it’s a closed subject. And there are just as many of the whites committing crimes everyday, and yet nothing much is made of it. But let a Negro do the same thing then the lid comes off with a bang. That also makes me boil...I just understand that’s all – and I can’t see why everybody else doesn’t. They are inclined to think that all of your people are of*

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce McGavren, *Letter to Richard Wright*, (Berkeley, California: September 7, 1954), Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

*the same crew like Bigger...but to me it seems like a very small number.*<sup>2</sup>

The racial situation in the mid-twentieth century United States was nowhere near ideal, but it is comforting to know that Wright's novel was able to make some readers more aware of the atrocities occurring against blacks, and thus more sympathetic to their situation. Although the main focus of Native Son is the oppression of blacks, the novel also touches upon the more general, yet regrettable, tendency of human nature to discriminate against many different groups of people who are perceived as 'different', 'inferior' or 'threatening'. In her 1940 letter, Eda Block-Passin of Chicago, Illinois writes about her experience reading Native Son as a Jew, and concludes:

*Native Son does not only give the reader a deeper insight into the life and psychology of the Negro, but the white under-dog as well.*<sup>3</sup>

Although the majority of readers did express a newfound sympathy for the struggles of African American life after reading Native Son, some readers sadly did not grasp the brutality of racism and the effect it has on the oppressed (such as Bigger), as demonstrated in the novel. Such readers do acknowledge that racism exists in their society (it would be virtually impossible for them to deny that fact), but tended to downplay the situation and / or show little sympathy for the victims. For example, in his 1942 letter, Jerry Shantz of Jackson, Michigan writes:

*Here in this town (Jackson Michigan) the negroes are always saying that they don't get a square deal. But let me tell you of a situation we have here that I'll bet they never stopped to think about. In the poor section of the town, where most of the negroes live, they have a large public playground. They play ball there*

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Cooper, *Letter to Richard Wright*, (Pennsylvania: July 14, 1942), Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

<sup>3</sup> Eda Block-Passin, *Letter to Richard Wright*, (Chicago, Illinois: August 10, 1940), Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

*and do have some swell times. It is a real large field. In that same section of town, the poor white children have to play ball in the street, because they have no playground, and the negroes will not let them play on theirs. (Which I don't blame them) But this ought to make you feel a little better, figuring you as you explained the negro to me. The pay off on that situation is tragic. I know because I am on the Accident Investigation Squad, and have picked up lots of poor white kids, hit by cars while playing in the street in that section of town. Never as yet have I had a negro child hit by a car in that section of the city. Hoping this will make you feel a little better, that sometimes the negro child does get a break that a white child does not get.*<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, the fact that occasionally some black children have access to a playground which the white children do not have access to does not even begin to compensate for the hundreds of years of systematic oppression experienced by blacks in America. Mr. Shantz is simply insensitive to the pain and tragedy suffered by black children each day in the United States, and his effort to make Wright “feel a little better” (line 16) because of the situation he describes is frankly insulting.

Perhaps most disturbing is the content of a 1940 letter written by George Stoney in Columbus, Mississippi. Stoney writes about comments made by other readers of Native Son that he has overheard in Columbus, making it clear that he does not agree with these opinions. He writes:

*They are saying they knew “niggers are like that” but they never expected “one of them” to say it. “Yes, it looks like they don't get treated so good up north, either,” (a little gleefully). After that there's a little more. “Yesh, they're like animals like that Bigger – but they're like dogs or any other kind of animal. They'll go crazy or die if you keep 'em penned up too tight. They've gotta have running space. Sometimes we keep 'em on too short a chain.” And for Mississippi, that is progress.*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jerry Shantz, *Letter to Richard Wright*, (Jackson, Michigan: June 4, 1942), Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

<sup>5</sup> George Stoney, *Letter to Richard Wright*, (Columbus, Mississippi: August 10, 1940), Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

Vile comments like these, and the fact that they are considered “progress” (line 8) for the state of Mississippi, demonstrate that the grim picture Wright paints of racism in America during the 1930s was not unrealistic.

Wright’s description of racism is captivating, but not novel. Due to its tragic nature, the somber racial situation of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century America is well documented. The more interesting aspect of Wright’s account is his attribution of racism to massive misunderstandings between both blacks and whites of the other social group. On pages 18 and 19, Bigger and Gus play ‘whites and blacks’, a game in which they imitate the ostentatious and rude way in which they believe all white people speak. The separation between blacks and whites leads Bigger to view white society as “a cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guided” (44). Wright does not blame Bigger for having such a narrow-minded view of white people, but simply demonstrates how his lack of exposure to whites fuels his resentment of them. Accordingly, he writes: “[Bigger] did not understand them; he distrusted them; really hated them” (71). Most of Bigger’s friends had never set foot in the white neighborhoods of Chicago; even the cells in the Cook County Jail were segregated.

Furthermore, Wright explains that because of racial segregation, “to Bigger and his kind, white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one’s feet in the dark” (114). Because of his belief that white society is homogeneous, Bigger hates Mary despite her attempts to befriend him. Bigger expresses this perfectly to Mr. Max when he says, “White folks and black folks is strangers. We don’t know what each other is thinking. Maybe she was trying to be kind; but she didn’t act like it. To me she

looked and acted like all other white folks...” (351). Wright does not blame Bigger for his generalization of white people, and he makes it clear that this mindset is due to the massive black-white divide entrenched in American society, and to the oppression Bigger has experienced from some white people. However, Wright projects a unique perspective, insofar as he recognizes that blacks, too, displayed racism against whites. The illustration of these two different directions of racism adds another dimension to Wright’s analysis of racialized blindness. Bigger In her 1942 letter, Jean Cooper of Pennsylvania reiterates this sentiment:

*I don’t blame them one bit for hating us. Then when they happen to run into a person who treats them halfway decent they don’t know how to take it. They feel they’re being kidded or laughed at. That’s what comes from being treated such as they have been.*<sup>6</sup>

Bruce McGavren of Berkeley, California also addresses the awkwardness of racial segregation from the white perspective in his 1954 letter:

*Often I have wanted to speak to or be friendly with some strange Negro person, and I am ashamed to admit that I hardly know what to say or quite how to behave. I am, myself, a victim of that gulf that separates White and Negro; I think this is true largely because I fear that I may say or do something which would offend and that it is safer not to risk it. I feel, somewhat, like Bigger did... never knowing quite what to do or say.*<sup>7</sup>

Wright also draws attention to the pervasive lack of awareness amongst whites about the awful conditions in which blacks lived. Mary illustrates this when she says, “You know Bigger, I’ve long wanted to go into these houses...and just *see* how your people live...I’ve been to England, France and Mexico, but I don’t know how people live

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Cooper, *Letter to Richard Wright*, (Pennsylvania: July 14, 1942), Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce McGavren, *Letter to Richard Wright*, (Berkeley, California: September 7, 1954), Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

ten blocks from me. We know so *little* about each other...Never in my life have I been inside of a Negro home” (69-70). Although many whites in the 1930s were not inherently racist, the mystery that shrouded black life prevented them from relating to blacks in a meaningful way. For example, Mr. Dalton is convinced that donating money to black schools and ping-pong tables to the South Side Boys’ Club will compensate for the massive societal obstacles that impede black success. The extent of this naïveté corresponds to the gulf of misunderstanding that exists.

Wright’s analysis of the ignorance about blacks is confirmed by his mail from white readers. Bruce McGavren also writes:

*I [read Native Son] because of my own lack of personal experience with [Negroes in America] and because I wish to better understand the problems they face in their every-day living...Meanwhile, let us hope that the day may soon come when men will have matured enough to appreciate each other for what they are, without preconceived attitudes of superiority and inferiority and without the underlying fear and mistrust born of a lack of personal acquaintance and natural social relationship.*<sup>8</sup>

Examples of misguided views of black life in Wright’s mail also appeared more indirectly, such as in Jean Cooper’s letter:

*I think that they are in a way far more happier than we, in that they are a peace loving people who go about their business in a calm reserved manner.*<sup>9</sup>

Cooper’s interpretation of black people is more benign than most. However, it is utterly naïve and simplistic, especially given the horrible living conditions, violence and general discrimination that plague many black families, such as the Thomas family, in Native

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Jean Cooper, *Letter to Richard Wright*, (Pennsylvania: July 14, 1942), Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

Son. Evidently, Wright's depiction of the mutual misunderstanding between blacks and whites is justified, and amplified by some his mail.

Each instance of racism in the novel is tied together at the climax of the novel in Max's speech when he declares, "Injustice which lasts for three long centuries and which exists among millions of people over thousands of square miles of territory, is injustice no longer; it is an accomplished fact of life. What is happening here today is not injustice, but *oppression*, an attempt to throttle or stamp out a new form of life" (391). The most important message of Max's speech is that Bigger's crime was "an act of *creation*" (400), a result of the crippling racism he experiences.

Max's speech is very powerful, and effectively conveys Wright's main conviction: that Bigger's behaviour is driven by external factors (mainly racial oppression), rather than internal ones. Wright supports this idea using metaphor when he writes that Bigger "was a long, taut, piece of rubber which a thousand white hands had stretched to the snapping point" (228). Each racial impediment that Bigger faces is independently disturbing, but the combined effect that they have on his behaviour is overwhelming and ultimately causes his demise.

Interestingly, whenever Bigger commits an act of violence, his specific body parts (rather than himself as individual) are portrayed as the perpetrators. For instance, "his fists clenched harder" (26) when he hit Gus, "his black open palm swept upward in a swift narrow arc" (183) when he smacked Bessie, and "his hand gripped the brick...and plunged downward through the darkness" (237) when he attempted to kill Bessie.

Wright's use of synecdoche in these scenarios suggests that Bigger had little or no control over these actions. Even Bessie's murder is portrayed as something driven by external

factors, out of Bigger's control. The three-time repetition of the phrase "he could not take her with him and he could not leave her behind" (235) suggests that Bigger had to murder Bessie because of his situation, not because he is a violent person. Bigger affirms this when he says, "I hurt folks 'cause I felt like I had to; that's all" (425).

Wright succeeds in establishing the unfortunate, yet significant, causal relationship between racial oppression and black crime. This relationship becomes apparent to anyone who reads Native Son, as expressed in 1948 by Roberta Key of Los Angeles, California, where she writes:

*Once while I was reading the book I got up and went to the kitchen to get a drink of water. On the way I remember saying to myself, "I must write to my mother and tell her I just committed a murder." For a moment I thought I was crazy, but as I read further I began to realize why I had such an overwhelming sense of guilt. At last I saw that I was guilty of Bigger Thomas's crime.<sup>10</sup>*

In addition to his attribution of Bigger's crimes to the racially oppressive nature of his upbringing, Wright also argues that Bigger's actions were guided by what he believed white people expected of him. At the beginning of the novel, Bigger frequently expresses that he feels like "something awful" (20) is going to happen to him. This foreshadows the impending events in Bigger's life, and contributes to the upsetting idea that Bigger was 'destined for jail' because of his race. On page 61, Bigger is confused when Mrs. Dalton tries to convince him to attend night school. Clearly no one (especially not a white person) had ever encouraged him to continue his education, and he has simply accepted the fact that as a young black man, he is expected to work minimum wage jobs rather than seek an education and / or a professional career. Later on, Bigger reveals to Max that

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<sup>10</sup> Roberta Key, *Letter to Richard Wright*, (Los Angeles, California: March 6, 1948), Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

when he wanted to be an aviator when he was younger, but knew that he couldn't because coloured boys were not allowed in aviation school. When Max asks him if there is anything else he would like to pursue, Bigger replies, "I'd like to be in business. But what chance has a black guy got in business? We ain't got no money. We don't own no mines, no railroads, no nothing. They don't want us to. They make us stay in one little spot..." (354). Clearly, Bigger has come to understand the extent of the limitations that white society has placed upon him.

Occasionally, Bigger expresses a perverse sense of accomplishment with regards to his murders. For the first time in his life, he has done something to change the course of his own future, and he feels like his actions were justified because white people expect to him to commit crime. Although this way of thinking is not morally sound, it does illustrate how deeply Bigger is affected by his perception of white society. On page 106, Bigger convinces himself that even though he did not mean to kill Mary, since the public would never believe it was an accident, it must not have been an accident. This shows deeply Bigger is effected by the vicious racial biases that surround his case. Bigger's conformity to public perception is affirmed when he says: "maybe they were right when they said that a black skin was bad, the covering of an apelike animal" (275). Hence, Bigger's actions are a product of how he sees his place in the world, and by committing crimes he is only molding to the stereotype that whites have carved for him.

One of the most interesting aspects of Native Son is the shift in Bigger's attitude towards Jan that occurs near the end of the novel. Eventually, Bigger starts to view Jan as an individual, rather than a simple cog in the 'white machine' of racial oppression. Wright writes, "a particle of white rock had detached itself from that looming mountain

of white hate...for the first time in [Bigger's] life, a white man became a human being to him" (289). Bigger also opens up to Max at the end of the book, departing drastically from the closed-off demeanor he maintained at the beginning of their relationship. These transformations in Bigger's attitudes towards Jan and Max suggest that there is hope that racialized blindness can be overcome, or at least decreased, by the formation of relationships between blacks and whites.

Ideally, readers of Native Son could comfort themselves by the fact that the atrocities described in the novel were only 'works of fiction', but unfortunately, this is not the case. The story of Bigger Thomas and the merciless racial oppression he faced is a story far too common in American history. In his emotionally charged novel, Wright effectively demonstrates the disastrous effects of the social conditions in which Bigger was raised, both in terms of his personal behaviour and the dynamics of his society as a whole. Thankfully, American racial equality has improved drastically since the 1930s. However, many countries do not enjoy the same standard of civil rights that exist in the United States. We must never forget the anguish experienced by thousands of men and women like Bigger Thomas, and as human beings it is our duty to ensure that racism, and its devastating societal impacts, is defeated.