

## Violence and Identity in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

*Native Son* details the struggle to create black identity in a society where blacks are perceived as white “property, heart and soul, body and blood” (332). The thoughts and actions of Bigger Thomas teach us that, as a result of this objectification, the “rhythms of...[black] life” are “indifference and violence” (27). At the close of the novel, Bigger recognizes that violence has become so integral to his identity as a human being that he “didn’t know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for ‘em” (429). Black violence in the novel therefore becomes a positive force, removing indifference and humanizing black identity. This contrast with the typical white perception of violence forces us to consider violence in a different light: if violence creates identity and meaning in the lives of black members of society, how can it be the force for evil that white culture makes it out to be? *Native Son* illustrates that rather than depraved intentions on the part of blacks, it is white objectification that ultimately necessitates the formation of black identity through violence.

The preponderance of literary scholarship on violence and identity in *Native Son* speaks to the significance of these two themes. Some critics argue that Wright’s use of violence is excessive, while others like Robert Butler and Obioma Nnaemeka cite violence as a necessary demonstration of Bigger’s nuanced persona. Many critics discuss the significance of violence in the novel, yet few connect violence with the formation of identity. Kadeshia Matthews describes violence as a necessary component of Bigger’s identity, but does not explore the meaning of that violence and the significant role that whites play in its perpetuation. Further discussion on the culpability of whites in the loss of black identity, and resulting black violence, is necessary.

*Native Son* demonstrates that violence is perpetuated by white objectification of blacks. In treating blacks as objects, whites create an environment that prevents blacks from identifying as human. Whereas a lack of violence continues to obscure black identity, violence allows blacks to be recognized as sentient, autonomous beings. In this paper, I assert that violence is the only means provided for blacks to establish independence and separate themselves from objectification, thus forming a new, albeit under-developed, identity. I argue that Bigger uses violence to overcome indifference and shame. I also show that the effects of violence ultimately limit Bigger's newfound identity, exposing weaknesses in the kind of identity that violence creates.

In *Native Son*, white on black discrimination creates a social construct in which blacks are viewed by both themselves and whites as less than human. This destructive objectification prevents blacks from recognizing themselves as autonomous human entities. Objectification is manifest from the opening scenes of the novel. Bigger's comments to Gus demonstrate that dehumanization is not only a phenomenon imposed by white society, but also one experienced and acknowledged by blacks: "They don't let us do *nothing*...I reckon we the only things in this city that can't go where we want to go and do what we want to do" (19, 21). Whether intentional or subconscious, Bigger's self-classification as a "thing" in these lines is indicative of the way he is made to feel by white society; like a thing, his every move is dictated by white rules. This is problematic, as the ability to make autonomous decisions is essential to the development of human identity. Robert Nozick argues that when one person determines another's actions and worth, "[the] process whereby they take this decision from you makes them a part-owner of you; it gives them a property right in you, just as...an animal or inanimate object"

(172). As white society legislates the actions of blacks, blacks effectively become white property, resulting in white-black relationships that mirror those of owner and object. It is these relationships and interactions that preclude the formation of autonomous black identity. Interactions with others, Thomas Luckmann claims, are integral to the creation of identity: "...personal identities are actively 'constructed' in social interaction, in processes of direct intersubjective communication" (286). Because whites do not treat interactions with Bigger as "intersubjective," or existing between two conscious human minds, his personal identity cannot be actively constructed; his experiences with whites lead him to feel that he "ain't a man no more" (353). As whites remove black autonomy and create communication that is less than intersubjective, the creation of black identity as human is rendered impossible.

Through the injustice of black objectification, Bigger becomes indifferent to the suffering of other human beings. Psychologists Brock Bastian and Nick Haslam describe the development of "cognitive responses to interpersonal maltreatment," asserting that "people enter into 'cognitive deconstructive' states when excluded. These involve emotional numbing, reduced empathy, cognitive inflexibility, and an absence of meaningful thought" (297). As Bigger copes with maltreatment by whites, he experiences the symptoms of cognitive deconstruction; this is manifest in even his most intimate relationships: "I wasn't in love with Bessie...I don't reckon I was ever in love with nobody...You had to have a girl, so I had Bessie" (352). Bigger can neither truly hate nor love; his maltreatment by whites has ensured indifference. His attitude toward Bessie is not one of understanding or humane connection, but as one object observing and interacting with another. Disturbing as this dysfunction is in itself, its ramifications are

far more sinister. As Bigger interacts with Bessie, he never considers the impact of his decisions; he is completely indifferent to her suffering or happiness. Whether initiating sex with Bessie or merely determining whether to show her attention, Bigger's choices are solely motivated by the inclinations of his own body. Because he does not view himself as an autonomous being, he fails to recognize that his actions have significant consequences.

Just as maltreatment results in indifference, limits on black autonomy create blindness among Bigger and his friends. In the society of *Native Son*, blacks are bred to react, observe, and obey. What little power blacks can attain comes not from following personal goals or defying social constructs, but from rejecting dreams and buying into imposed restrictions. Repressing both desire and action is a painful and dehumanizing choice; blindness, therefore, becomes a coping mechanism that shields blacks from the horror of full comprehension. Gus demonstrates self-imposed blindness as he responds to Bigger's indignation: "Aw, ain't no use feeling that way about it. It don't help none... You'll go nuts... You think too much" (20-21). It is clear that the issue is not that Gus is content where Bigger is dissatisfied; rather, the difference between the two men is that Gus has turned a blind eye to his frustrations—he does not allow himself to consider them. This elucidates Gus's comment that Bigger "think[s] too much;" while Bigger is also a frequent victim of blindness, he fights to maintain an awareness of the injustice imposed upon him. By resisting blindness, Bigger is able to form ideas that, although initially criticized by his peers, ultimately lead him to meaningful action.

As Bigger recognizes blindness in his family members and friends, he becomes ashamed to accept an identity that is less than human; it is this shame that ultimately

compels him to action. Shame develops as he reflects on the numbing properties of his mother's religion that "he needed but could never have unless he laid his head upon a pillow of humility and gave up his hope of living in the world. And he would never do that" (254). Bigger sees religion as a form of blindness in that it prevents his mother from fully accepting the cruel reality of the world in which she lives. Obioma Nnaemeka asserts that Bigger finds this blindness shameful because he "does not want to 'make up' for anything; he intensely desires to live fully like a free man" (18). Bigger's determined rejection of blindness compels him to face the pain of objectification in its full force; it is his pride that keeps him from using religion as a crutch. Mrs. Thomas' religion comforts her in that it gives her hope that the future will be brighter. As a Christian, she believes in the power of mercy for Bigger, both from Christ and from the Daltons. Bigger sees his mother's faith as unrealistic and embarrassing; he becomes "paralyzed with shame" and feels "violated" (301). As a stimulus for action, shame is more powerful than blindness or indifference because it forces Bigger to consider himself in relation to others. He becomes ashamed because he is fully aware of his objectification and inferiority to whites. The blindness of those around him compounds this shame because it results in a loss of the sliver of control that Bigger's awareness maintains. When Mrs. Thomas interacts with the Daltons, "Bigger's shame for his mother amounted to hate...He felt in another moment he would have leaped at her" (302). On this and many other occasions throughout the novel, shame produces violence.

In seeking to eliminate shame, Bigger turns to violence. Violent acts become acts of creation that endow him with a sense of control and meaning. The paramount expression of Bigger's violence is an attempt to rid himself of shame—his murder of

Mary is created by the shame of being a black man caught in a white woman's bedroom. Later, as he reflects on his culpability in the crime, he isolates shame as a driving force behind his actions: "He felt that his murder of her was more than amply justified by the...shame she had made him feel" (114). Just as Bigger's shame ultimately stems from a lack of autonomy or control, his violence arises as a means to gain control. Through violence, Bigger inflicts emotional and physical pain on whites, alleviating his sense of inferiority by controlling white lives. As Krista Thomason notes, "shame makes us feel that we are not in control of who we are...One of the ways of alleviating shame is to do something that regains a sense of control" (18). It is when Bigger feels objectified, or defined by "aspects...that fall outside of...[his] self-conception" that he becomes ashamed; creating violence allows him to redefine himself according to his own choices (Thomason 11). As he becomes increasingly violent, Bigger recognizes that violence liberates him from shame because it creates an autonomy and control that he cannot obtain otherwise: "Of late he had liked to hear tell of men who could rule others, for in actions such as these he felt that there was a way to escape from...shame" (115). Because Bigger is unable to control the outcomes of his own life through constructive means, he finds solace in controlling others through violence. Ultimately, this violence serves not only to alleviate shame, but also as the driving force behind Bigger's ascent to human identity.

As Bigger comes to terms with the effects of his violence, he begins to feel remorse for his actions, and, as a result, pity on the victims of his crimes. This remorse creates a positive emotional connection with other human beings, providing Bigger with a sense of human identity. Before Bigger is able develop interpersonal connections, he

must recognize emotional similarities between himself and others. As Bigger recognizes that his violent acts have been the cause of suffering, he is able to relate to other human beings through his violence. Jan, a white man that Bigger had previously resented, “became a human being to him...he had killed what this man loved and had hurt him” (289). Jan becomes human to Bigger because Bigger is now able to connect with him; Bigger too has experienced hurt and loss. As the court puts Bessie’s body on display as evidence, Bigger feels “a deeper sympathy for Bessie than at any time when she was alive” because he is finally able to connect with her emotionally; he too has been objectified (331). Because Bigger’s life has been so heavily marked with suffering, the range of his emotional capacity is limited, inhibiting his ability to empathize with those around him. As his violence produces remorse, he recognizes that there are others around him suffering as he is. Psychologist Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela asserts that “remorse stems from a potential for empathy,” suggesting that “remorse is...concerned with the other [rather than]...the self” (21). Remorse creates the first instance of positive emotional connection for Bigger because it forces him to recognize the pain of others and connect it to his own. As a result of this remorse, “a reciprocal emotional process...occurs between two people... demonstrating that they are part of the human universe” (Gobodo-Madikizela, 26). Bigger’s remorse for his violence produces emotional connections, ultimately reversing his objectification and identifying him as a human being.

As the novel comes to a close, Bigger is able to find peace through exploring his newfound human identity. It is evident, however, that Bigger will never experience the full benefits of being human; humanization is not enough to save him from his impending

death sentence. As Max prepares to leave Bigger for the last time, Max's eyes are "full of terror," but Bigger feels "all right" knowing that "what I killed for, I am...what I killed for must've been good" (429). This ambiguous statement demonstrates both Bigger's progress and his inability to reach full comprehension of what it means to be human. In accepting responsibility for his violence and asserting that its motivation was "good," Bigger recognizes his human ability to make autonomous decisions. By identifying himself as the positive force that drove him to kill, he also demonstrates a newly developed self-awareness and peace with himself that he did not previously possess. However, it is also evident in Bigger's inability to specify the force that compelled him to kill that his understanding of his own identity is incomplete. Bigger himself recognizes this, as he considers why he does not want to die: "He felt he wanted to live now...in order to find out...to feel it more deeply...But there was no way now. It was too late" (363). Human identity must be experienced to be fully understood, and there are many things that Bigger will never experience as a human. Bigger is glad that violence has helped him to "feel alive," but he realizes as he prepares to die that he "didn't want to kill" (428). Ultimately this recognition allows Bigger to accept the fact that he is going to die without "a wholeness which had been denied him all his life" (362); his fate is the fault of a white society that "wouldn't let me live" (428). Bigger's reflections in the closing scenes of the novel reinforce the notion that white objectification breeds violence.

Bigger's life of violence ends in violent death, suggesting that white objectification of blacks in *Native Son* not only results in extralegal black violence, but also that it ultimately legislates white violence. In response to Bigger's violence, "eight thousand armed men...combed cellars, old buildings and more than one thousand Negro

homes in the Black Belt,” while legalized vigilante groups provoke white on black violence “all over the city” (256, 251). This excerpt demonstrates that in *Native Son*, both whites and blacks strive to regain control in powerless situations, exercising unwarranted and unjustified violence indicative of racial tensions; both whites and blacks inflict pain and suffering on the victims of their violent actions. Unlike black violence, however, white violence is provided for and protected by legislation. Ta-Nehisi Coates argues that, within the modern violence paradigm, distinctions between white and black violence are superficial and arbitrary: “...certain things are violence, and certain things are not. Certain things are the acts committed by thugs, and certain things are the acts committed by the law.” In the world of *Native Son* and, to some extent, the world in which we currently reside, black violence lacks the protection that permits white on black violence. While violent acts committed by whites and blacks appear similar in terms of motivation, action, and influence, the consequences of violence are significantly different for black citizens. In the eyes of white society, white on black violence means sacrificing black lives so that “peaceful and industrious people may be safe;” black violence, by contrast, is the expression of “sub-human killer[s]...who know no law, no self-control, and no sense of reason” (Wright 414, 408). This is a contradiction that elevates whites, authorizing them to objectify blacks and reignite the ensuing cycle of violent expression. In scrutinizing the issue of black violence, whites are blinded to the ramifications of white violence; thus, the inescapable rhythms of violence remain.

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