



12-8-2016

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Gee, Anna M. (2016) "Violence and Identity in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol9/iss2/5>

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

Anna Gee

In 1863, the United States legally abolished slavery, an institution that had existed in America for over two hundred years. Yet seventy-five years later, Richard Wright wrote that in the America of 1940, blacks were still perceived as white “property, heart and soul, body and blood” (*Native Son* 332). In today’s America, racial tensions are never far from the forefront of social, economic, and political issues. As modern-day Americans observe and interact with this tension, particularly with acts of racially charged violence, we must question its origins, critically examining who is responsible for the disproportionate distribution of violence among races.

In *Native Son*, Richard Wright examines how the correlation of race and violence produces devastation through the novel’s main character Bigger Thomas, whose “rhythms of . . . life” have become “indifference and violence” (27). Bigger ultimately recognizes that violence has become so integral to his identity as a human being that he “didn’t know [he] was really alive in this world until [he] felt things hard enough to kill for ‘em” (429). Black violence in the novel functions as a positive force, allowing Bigger to triumph over indifference and, for the first time, explore his identity as a human being. This notion contradicts the white perception of violence as it appears in the novel and forces the

modern reader to confront difficult questions: if violence creates identity and meaning in the lives of black individuals, what do we make of the traditional paradigm of violence as immoral? If violence is universally condemnable, how do we explain the disproportionately harsh retributive consequences of black violence? *Native Son* illustrates that rather than a depraved and “peculiar mentality” inherent to black humankind, it is white objectification that ultimately necessitates the formation of black identity through violence (281).

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 discussion of violence in the novel is excessive while others, like Robert Butler and Obioma Nnaemeka, cite violence as a necessary demonstration of Bigger’s complicated persona. Among critics that discuss the significance of violence in the novel, few connect violence with the formation of identity. Professor Kadeshia Matthews, a specialist in twentieth century African American literature and culture, 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 the resulting black violence, is necessary. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of both white dominance on black self-perception and the kind of violence that ensues throughout *Native Son*.

Native Son demonstrates that violence is perpetuated by white objectification of blacks. In treating blacks as objects, whites create an environment that precludes black identification as human. Whereas a lack of violence continues to obscure black identity, violence allows blacks to recognize themselves 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 to form a new, albeit underdeveloped, identity. I argue that Bigger uses violence to overcome indifference and shame. I further show that the consequences of violence ultimately limit Bigger’s newfound identity, exposing the weaknesses in the kind of identity that violence creates.

In *Native Son*, white-on-black discrimination establishes a social construct in which Bigger and other black characters are viewed by both themselves and whites as less than human and non-autonomous. Objectification is manifest from the opening scenes of the novel. Bigger’s comments to Gus, his primary confidant and a fellow black teenager, 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: as 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. Philosopher 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. These relationships and interactions preclude the formation of autonomous black identity. In his article “On Social Interaction and the Communicative Construction of Personal Identity, Knowledge and Reality,” sociologist Thomas Luckmann explains that interactions with others 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.

Suppression of Bigger’s human identity renders him 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: maltreatment by whites has ensured indifference. His attitude toward his lover, 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, culminating in Bigger’s murder of Bessie. 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, Bigger assumes that he is controlled by exterior forces, not recognizing his ability to make conscious decisions. As a result, he is ignorant to the devastating consequences of his actions.

Just as maltreatment results in indifference, limitations on black autonomy foster blindness for Bigger and his friends. In the society of *Native Son*, blacks are bred to react, observe, and obey. While whites “do things” and “got things,” blacks are relegated to “the outside of the world peeping in through a knothole in the fence” (20). What little power blacks can attain comes not from following personal goals or defying social constructs but from keeping “firmly in their place” (281). The right to life for blacks depends on strict adherence to white law; if they step beyond that boundary, white leaders proudly declare, “they cannot live” (281). 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. As Bigger begins to recognize blindness in both himself and others in the black community, he is deeply troubled by the injustice from which it stems. His friend 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). The distinction in this instance is not a juxtaposition of conformity in Gus and dissatisfaction in Bigger; rather, the difference between the two young men is that Gus has turned a blind eye to his frustrations—he does not allow himself to consider them. This distinction 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 and autonomous 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 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 blindness that prevents his mother from fully accepting the world's cruel realities. Critic 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’s religion comforts her in giving 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, the parents of Bigger’s victim, Mary. As Bigger observes his mother pleading with the Daltons in his prison cell, he views her faith as unrealistic and embarrassing; he becomes “paralyzed with shame” and feels “violated” (301). Shame is more powerful than blindness or indifference because it stimulates Bigger to act and forces him to consider himself in relation to others. Bigger becomes ashamed because he is fully aware of his objectification and inferiority to whites. The blindness of those around him compounds this shame because blindness steals 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 occasion and throughout the novel, shame produces violence.

In seeking to eliminate shame, Bigger turns to violence. Violent acts create a semblance of control and meaning that endows him with power. The paramount expression of Bigger’s violence is an attempt to rid himself of shame—his murder of Mary Dalton 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 Professor 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 not only serves to alleviate shame but is also 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 fosters an emotional connection with other human beings, providing Bigger with a sense of human identity. Before Bigger is able to 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. Mary’s boyfriend 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 more real to Bigger because Bigger can now relate to him emotionally. Different as their experiences may be, Jan is suffering at the hands of another person whose actions he cannot control, an experience with which Bigger is intimately familiar. Similarly, as the court puts Bessie’s body on display, 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 (331). White society as represented by the court treats her corpse not as the remains of a human being but as a valuable object to further their own purposes, an objectification with which Bigger can relate. 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 this pain 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 connection, ultimately reversing his objectification and binding him to humankind.

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 Bigger's attorney 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 expression demonstrates both Bigger's progress and his inability to fully comprehend 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 through his new-found human consciousness. Bigger is grateful 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). These reflections in the closing scenes of the novel reinforce the notion that white objectification breeds violence.

Bigger's life of violence ends in a state-sanctioned, violent death, suggesting that white objectification of blacks in *Native Son* not only results in extralegal black violence but 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 in a vain effort to apprehend Bigger Thomas," and legalized vigilante groups provoked white-on-black violence "all over the city" (256, 251). These excerpts demonstrate 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. Writer 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 in theory violent acts committed by whites or blacks are equally reprehensible, the consequences of violence are significantly different for black citizens. In the eyes of *Native Son*’s 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 contradiction elevates whites, justifying their objectification of blacks and reigniting the ensuing cycle of violent expression. In their condemnation of black violence, whites are blinded to the ramifications of white violence; thus, the inescapable rhythms of violence remain.

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