

## Annotated Bibliography

Arman, Charles de. "Bigger Thomas: The Symbolic Negro and the Discrete Human Entity." *Major Literary Characters: Bigger Thomas*, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990. 83-89.

In this essay, de Arman frames Bigger's development and actions within a context that marked many works by black artists of the time: the struggle of characters to both serve as embodiments of the "Oppressed Black Man," while also being authentic individuals. De Arman traces Bigger's attempts to shape his own identity through independent thought and action as the fictionalized society around him (and, by extension, the novel's readers) seeks to have him represent the "Negro Problem." In the last pages of the book, de Arman claims, Bigger finally affirms that he, as a character, is much more than a symbol; referring to a plot point that might spoil the ending for some people, de Arman writes that "[he] allows nothing to be bigger than Bigger." Ultimately, Bigger is capable of envisioning himself as a self-defined individual, but those around him continue to fail to see him as a person. This essay, useful in its own right, does a good job of discussing something that came up when we discussed Sherman Alexie: the tendency to "make symbolic" the characters of minority writers representing their own culture.

Baldwin, James. "Everybody's Protest Novel." *Notes of a Native Son*. New York: Beacon Press, 1984. 13-23.

Richard Wright's protégé James Baldwin uses this essay to criticize the tradition of novels of black oppression, beginning with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and following through to *Native Son*. He claims that these novels, generally, are misguided polemics that do not provide a cogent or realistic answer to the problems they represent; instead, through the equally divisive methods of empty moralism or savage brutality, the novels create a bipolar discourse in which "black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, longing for each other's slow, exquisite death." Baldwin sees the fearful, bitter, and hate-filled Bigger Thomas, in particular, as a "continuation.... of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy." Though this source deals with *Native Son* in a limited way, it is useful in that it distills many criticisms against the novel while also providing Baldwin's views on the failings of "social protest" literature as a genre.

Butler, Robert. "The Loeb and Leopold Case: A Neglected Source for Richard Wright's *Native Son*." *African American Review* 39.4 (2004): 555-567.

Butler's essay grounds the creation of Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's lifelong fascination with criminal behavior, whether it be among those he knew, in the public records, or in the pulp movies and fiction of his time. After acknowledging the scholarship about other real-life crimes that inspired Wright, Butler chooses to zero in on the 1924 Loeb and Leopold murder case. He discusses a great number of direct references to and indirect echoes (such as the murders themselves, the ransom process, the sensationalized trials and styles of litigation, etc.) of the case in *Native Son*. Though he acknowledges that the "radically different" social and economic backgrounds of Bigger vs. Loeb/Leopold might seem to make personal comparisons useless, he describes a number of interesting parallels in their psychological profiles, such as the sense of power derived from killings, the "fantasies" the killers constructed, and their fascination with news coverage and "image" of their own crimes, among other similarities. By the ironic juxtaposition of the three men, Wright is able to point to

the systemic problems that create violence and moral decay *across* societies, but also to evoke the starkly different outcomes of the two cases.

Carreiro, Amy. "Ghosts of the Harlem Renaissance: 'Negrotarians' in Richard Wright's *Native Son*." The Journal of Negro History 84.3 (1999): 247-259.

Carreiro's article traces Wright's growing disenchantment with reform-minded whites or "Negrotarians"; this word, a combination of *negro* and *humanitarian*, identifies white philanthropists who, in Wright's view, served as admirable patrons of the arts during the Harlem Renaissance but faltered as advocates for social progress in the subsequent years. Carreiro examines Wright's feelings as displayed through his depiction of the Jan and the Daltons who, though they espouse racial progress, view Bigger as a sort of "experiment," contribute to systemic forms of discrimination such as segregated schools, and engage in "token egalitarianism" for personal satisfaction. Carreiro finds that Wright views the Negrotarians as misguided, disconnected, and ultimately blind to their own hypocrisy and complicity in social racism (such as when Mr. Dalton's donation of ping-pong tables conflicts with his cutthroat rent rates for black tenants). Carreiro concludes her article by providing an overview of the liberal white (particularly Communist) criticism of the Negrotarian characters in the novel, as well as frames *Native Son* as a reaction to the much more sedate and "prim" protest literature of the Harlem Renaissance.

Ellis, Aime. "Boys in the Hood': Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*." Callaloo 29.1 (2006): 182-201.

Ellis's essay seeks to counteract the traditional notion of Bigger's friendships serving only as "hypermasculine" reinforcements of stereotypes about urban black males. In *Native Son*, she argues, Bigger and his friends form a "defiantly oppositional" subculture to create a racial community, combat social alienation, and ultimately make sense of a world filled with racial terror. Bigger and his friends, she claims, create a sort of refuge, a "private and guarded space of black male homosociality" that serves as a basis for defining themselves as humans in a dehumanizing culture; by staking out territory in the streets, the pool hall, and the movie house, Bigger and his friends are able to exercise their own power and assert themselves in this separate world. This foundation, then, provides a base from which the young men can ideally exert their individualism in the real world.

Fairfield, James. "Deadly Discourses: Examining the Roles of Language and Silence in the Lynching of Emmett Till and Wright's *Native Son*." Arizona Quarterly 63.4 (2007): 63-82.

Fairfield situates lynching as the traditional punishment for black men who "move beyond their expected place in the community"; historically, this transgression was most associated with actions and speech roles toward white women, as when Chicagoan Emmett Till was lynched for flirting with a Mississippi woman. In the case of both Till and Bigger Thomas, though they were capable of thriving in their own language environments, they were punished (killed) when they were not fluent in or even familiar with the "master language" of white society. Till was killed when his Northern habit of talking freely about and with white women clashed with the "unspoken language" of the South; similarly, while Bigger's mastery of Black Vernacular is displayed throughout the novel, he finds himself unable to converse with or even understand the whites around him. As his interactions with Mary go on, Fairfield

argues that Bigger is unable to linguistically intervene to stop the ill-fated “events that have been set into motion.” This shock prompts much of the rest of Bigger's progress through the novel; much of it is concerned with preserving his own voice by silencing others (I.e.- smothering Mary's cries, killing Bessie so she won't “talk”). In the cases of both Till and Bigger, Fairfield concludes, the inability to “talk the talk” of the master community, as well as the desire to fabricate ones own self through individualized language, lead to the destruction of the young men. In general, though this article deals with a very specific topic, it provides a good introduction to Bigger's historical links as well as the novel's overarching theme of inadvertent transgressions against alien norms.

McCall, Dan. “The Bad Nigger.” *Richard Wright's Native Son*, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988. 5-22.

McCall addresses the arguments, put forth by Baldwin and others, that Bigger Thomas was for Wright's white audience members a reinforcement of stereotypes about brutish, lascivious black males – in other words, the “Bad Nigger.” He claims that Wright's goal was not to convey what could dubiously be called the full range of experience possible to the black male of the 1930s, but to hone in on and dissect the very stereotype of brutishness that prevented such an analysis from being possible in the popular culture. This focus was symptomatic of and introductory to the greater “emotional intensity” that Wright felt was a cornerstone of frustrated blacks in America; to focus on the wider “folk culture”, McCall claims, would ignore the most unavoidable and fundamental realities of fear and anger that prevent Bigger from actually becoming a free member of this larger culture; as he writes: “to create a 'folk tradition' in the slum – to create whole human beings in a brutally fragmented world – would not be to take that world seriously.” This article, I think, serves as an excellent introductory rebuttal to the charge that Bigger is one-dimensional and shallow.

Redden, Dorothy. “Richard Wright and *Native Son*: Not Guilty.” *Major Literary Characters: Bigger Thomas*, ed. Harold Bloom. Chelsea House Publishers: New York, 1990. PAGES 73-82.

This article is useful not only in its own analytical right, but also as an introduction to the critical reactions to *Native Son* over a period of several decades. Redden addresses a common critical charge that *Native Son* was a wild, irresponsible attack on white society. She claims that this argument, whether overt or submerged, takes three forms: the argument that the book relies too much on Wright's own emotion (particularly hatred, rage, and vengefulness); the argument that Wright is far too didactic; and the argument that Wright uses these two methods to “place a burden of guilt heavily on the shoulders of its intended white audience.” She refutes these arguments: the charge that Wright is too emotional is countered with details of when he was thoughtful and methodical, and by hypothetical scenes and character traits that might have found a place in a more “hysterical” text; she counters charges of clumsy, “unliterary” propaganda (particularly in the “Fate” section), claiming that the third book's shift in tone is a natural move from the concrete to the philosophical, and that Max's speech is a realistic courtroom scene untainted by a scarce few “Marxist cliches”; to the charge that the book seeks to threaten a guilty white society, she sets forth on an expanded argument about Wright's ideas of the uselessness of guilt, a destructive, negative state. Instead, she claims, Wright is frankly portraying the world around him in an effort to affect recognition of reality and the need for substantive change.

Singh, Nikhil. “Retracing the Black-Red Thread.” *American Literary History* 15.4 (2003): 830-840.

Singh's article focuses on the connection between Marxist ideology/organizations and black intellectuals in the 1930s. With the party's early antiracist advocacy and focus on blacks as the "most exploited segment of the proletariat," it was natural for these intellectuals to find a home in their ranks; as Richard Wright said, "[m]any a black boy in America has seized upon the rungs of the Red ladder to climb out of his Black Belt." Later, as the political Left in general became a viable path to civil equality and the CPUSA was seen as a sort of dogmatic straitjacket, black intellectuals increasingly broke from the party. Singh traces this turnabout with copious references to contemporary literary and cultural texts, including a focus on Wright's work as the most natural representation of these works.

Spear, Allan H. *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto 1890-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.

This book, which obviously has a much greater scope than *Native Son* itself, serves as an excellent foundation for research; indeed, almost all of the articles which look at *Native Son* as a sociological work point to this text. In it, Spear traces the transformation of Chicago from a relatively "open" city to one guided by a strict system of segregation (educational, housing, geographic, etc.) and racism; its overarching frame is the establishment of both a physical and institutional "ghetto" that constrains the city's black citizens. Its later chapters focus on the migration from the south (of which both Wright and Bigger were a part), and the effect this influx of African Americans had on a city whose race relations had reached an uneasy stasis; one result, which Spear represents in vivid section, was the horrific race riot of 1919, in which 37 Chicagoans died and 537 were injured. Though the events catalogued in this book took place at least 20 years before *Native Son* was set, it serves as an excellent chronicle of the urban conditions Wright saw and sought to represent. For another text on these issues, consider finding *The Negro in Chicago*, part of the *New York Times*' "The American Negro" book series.