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A 'Native Son' Reimagined, With James Baldwin in Mind



The playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, left, and the visual artist Rashid Johnson collaborated on the latest film adaptation of Richard Wright's "Native Son," setting it in present-day Chicago. Credit Gioncarlo Valentine for The New York Times

By Salamishah Tillet

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In its earliest conception, Richard Wright's best-seller "Native Son" was envisioned for the screen.

"To make the screen version of a novel into which I had put so much of myself was a dream which I had long hugged to my heart," Richard Wright told the Portuguese magazine "Revista Branca" in 1950.

The story of a young African-American man from the South Side of Chicago, trapped by the stigma and the stifling conditions of racism, has in fact lent itself to film dramatization more than once. A 1951 feature, starring a 45-year-old Wright after the actor Canada Lee dropped out, was a [commercial](#) and [critical](#) disaster — it didn't help that the film, made in Argentina, was extensively edited [by American censors](#). A 1986 version made by Jerrold Freedman and starring Elizabeth McGovern, Oprah Winfrey, Ving Rhames and Matt Dillon [did not fare any better](#).

But it was Wright's words on the page, and not its cinematic offspring, that inspired the visual artist Rashid Johnson to make his own "Native Son" adaptation — his feature directorial debut — premiering Saturday on HBO.

Johnson, who was first given the book as a teenager living in Chicago by his mother and history professor, Cheryl Johnson-Odim, describes having long been "obsessed" with "Native Son." "I think it is everything that is right and wrong with the existential journey," he said. "I think the book sits in the pantheon of

literary narratives that have evolved to help us understand the black experience today, which isn't a monolithic one. Not every black story fosters a sense of success or optimism.”

This newest version of “Native Son,” adapted by the playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, remains set in Chicago but in the present day and with notable tweaks. (Spoilers follow for anyone unfamiliar with the story.)

Bigger Thomas (a subtly charismatic Ashton Sanders), is a 20-year-old bicycle messenger who finds a job driving for Will Dalton, a wealthy white businessman, and his family. Bigger dons green hair and black studded jackets, is a metal and classical music fan and steadfastly refuses “stereotypical Negro [expletive]”; he aspires to be more than a driver, a drug dealer or social delinquent.



“The idea of a multidimensional Bigger was so compelling,” said Parks of the contemporary version of the central character, played by Ashton Sanders.

His mother (Sanaa Lathan), a striving law student, and his girlfriend Bessie (a vibrant KiKi Layne) nurture his ambitions alongside their own, while he becomes friends with Dalton’s “woke” white daughter Mary (Margaret Qualley) and her boyfriend Jan (Nick Robinson). Midway through the story that inherits its tripartite structure of “Fear,” “Flight” and “Fate” from the novel, Bigger accidentally suffocates Mary to death, which sends him on the run and his family and friends into a tailspin.

Wright intended for readers to see Bigger as a product of “the moral ... horror of Negro life in the United States.” The novel opens with Bigger brutally killing a rat that has infested his family’s one-room South Side apartment, which is owned by his slumlord employer, Dalton. (In the book, the character is Henry Dalton, not Will.) Later he kisses the inebriated and unconscious Mary, and then smothers her to keep her quiet when her blind mother enters the bedroom. On the run, an unhinged Bigger rapes and kills Bessie before the police eventually catch him, put him on trial and execute him.

Several generations of African-Americans artists, particularly those who came of age in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, have praised “Native Son,” with its bold and bloody take on American race relations, as the ultimate protest novel.

Others received it differently. In 1949, James Baldwin, a young writer who Wright had championed and mentored, [published an essay](#) titled “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” which critiqued “Native Son” for

continuing to perpetuate the racial stereotypes that “it was written to destroy.” For Baldwin, Bigger’s true tragedy was not being poor or black or American, but that “he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being subhuman and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed to him at his birth.”

Rather than avoid Baldwin’s insights, like the earlier adaptations did, Johnson’s movie leans into them. “Baldwin’s criticism is unavoidable,” Johnson conceded. “I mean, now, Wright and Baldwin are so matched together, that it would be foolish and disingenuous to tell the story without taking into account what we know.”

In his quest to contend with these two conflicting artistic visions, Johnson believed Parks was the only writer up to the task: Having been a former student of Baldwin’s and a playwright whose complex depictions of black masculinity in such works as the Pulitzer Prize-winning “Topdog/Underdog” and, more recently, “[White Noise](#),” made her the ideal person to update Bigger for a contemporary audience.



“Wright and Baldwin are so matched together, that it would be foolish and disingenuous to tell the story without taking into account what we know,” said Johnson, seen here on set with Sanders, left, and Nick Robinson.

With permission from Wright’s literary estate, Parks’s vision diverges largely from the original plot, excising the long trial scene at the end in which Max, a white Communist lawyer unsuccessfully defends Bigger. “Rather than spend 30 minutes of the film in scenes that debate Bigger’s innocence or his guilt, we got to use our dramatic moments and extra minute on the front end showing Big’s friendship with Mary and Jan and Bessie,” Parks said.

By further establishing Bigger’s intimate relationships, the audience, for the first time, sees the depth of his interior life.

“The idea of a multidimensional Bigger was so compelling. That is our biggest difference,” she continued. “Wright created him intentionally as a character that’s driven by his circumstance, so to make him fleshed out and fully formed is an extraordinary move and really our way of recognizing how far we have come.”

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451 N Paulina Street, Chicago 60622
312 243 2129 moniquemeloche.com

Though indebted to Baldwin and Wright, the film's distinctive aesthetics reflect Johnson's background as an [experimental photographer](#) and Parks's flair for avant-garde dialogue. In their beautifully constructed cinematic world, Bigger is not maniacal (he does not rape or murder Bessie) and is more sympathetic. But he is also so self-aware that his meta-commentary includes quoting W.E.B. DuBois's famous passage on African-Americans' "double consciousness" from "The Souls of Black Folk."

As much as this latest depiction of Bigger Thomas emerges as an archetype of black millennial ambition and angst, he remains, despite his greatest desires, unable to outrun or outsmart the ways in which his black life matters so little to those police officers with whom he has his fatal encounter. In a final scene that is eerily reminiscent of the video footage of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald's killing by the Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke in 2014, this "Native Son" does not feel like a movie making up for lost time, but rather one that we know too well, played on repeat, with limited justice in sight.