

## Reviewing HBO's "Adaptation" of Richard Wright's *Native Son*

by C. Liegh McInnis\*

So, Friday, I was able to view HBO's "adaptation" of Richard Wright's *Native son*. In full disclosure, Salamishah Tillet's article, "A *Native Son* Reimagined, with James Baldwin in Mind," did not make me want to see HBO's "adaptation" as I feared the film would use the name of *Native Son* to create something that has nothing to do with Wright's vision and everything to do with giving Bigger some sort of "so-called" agency that strips the work of its real teeth, which is the notion that Bigger, as a symbol of one aspect of the American Negro, is a creation of white supremacy. Baldwin's primary issue with *Native Son* is that, for him, Wright had surrendered to the notion that blacks are merely captives in a white web. As Baldwin writes in "Everybody's Protest Novel," "For Bigger's tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; 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 him at birth." Thus, for Baldwin, the failure of *Native Son* is that Bigger does not acknowledge or fight for his humanity in a way that is more pleasing to Baldwin. Yet, the problem with Baldwin's critique is that he, for whatever reason, does not realize that Wright is not telling Baldwin's story but a different story, one familiar to Wright, one in which black minds and bodies had been stripped of their agency and their ability to know that they had agency and reduced to intuitive/instinctive acts of destruction that served as their only means of rebellion against the loss of their humanity. This, of course, is not true of all black people or of all the characters that Wright provides throughout his career. Yet, it is true of this character, Bigger, and the many more Biggers that he symbolizes. As Wright asserts in "How 'Bigger' Was Born," "If I had known only one Bigger, I would not have written *Native Son*." So, while Baldwin may have never known a Bigger Thomas, Wright provides five types of "Bigger Thomases" in explaining how he came to create *Native Son*. Yet, the irony or hypocrisy is that Baldwin, possibly as a Freudian slip, did admit that he, too, knew a Bigger Thomas as he stated "My father was the type of man that could not bend. Consequently, he could only be broken" (Baldwin, *Price of the Ticket*, 1989). Clearly, Baldwin's own father fits the mold of any one of Wright's Biggers. Still, Baldwin chose to deny the existence of Bigger, and HBO's *Native Son* is doing all it can to prove Baldwin right. I'm reminded of the manner in which the Will Smith film adaptation of *I, Robot* has absolutely nothing in common with the purpose of Isaac Asimov's original collection of stories, *I, Robot*, other than the title and the three laws of robots. In the same way that Smith's *I, Robot* butchers the meaning and purpose of Asimov's *I, Robot*, Baldwin and HBO's denial of the existence of Wright's Bigger denies the existence of or the totality of the system that continues to create Bigger Thomases.

When I read, "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" (Tillet), I began to think that the screenwriter, Suzan-Lori Parks, and director, Rashid Johnson, are not concerned with Wright's vision but with the manner in which they can justify Baldwin by mangling Wright's work. And, after viewing the film, sadly, I was correct. As I was leaving the film, someone asked, "What did you think?" I replied, "It would be a pretty good movie if it wasn't titled *Native Son*." There is nothing aesthetically or ideologically wrong with HBO's *Native Son* other than it's not *Native Son*. It seems that the writer, Parks, and director, Johnson, have no clue that two black men (Wright and Baldwin) can be equally brilliant while having an

equally different notion of what things are, especially if they are a generation apart. So, to tell Wright's story from a position of reconciling it to Baldwin's notion of it is to do a disservice to Wright's vision as well as Baldwin's own vision and work. It is as if only one black vision/ideology can exist at one time, which means that, regardless of all the "so-called" progress, African people are still viewed as a monolith. (And while I love *Black Panther*, I also understand that Hollywood made sure that the film's heavy hand forces black people to choose integration over self-determinism and armed resistance by flattening the latter to a caricature of itself.) We don't need to reconcile Wright's work to Baldwin for the sake of an ideological kum ba yah moment when both men have equally brilliant catalogs that stand on their own merits. As such, when I read that Parks was "the ideal person to update Bigger for a contemporary audience" (Tillet), I wondered if "update" means "pacify" Wright's anger to be more palatable to white liberals and Negroes who desire to create art that makes white people comfortable. Moreover, the film seems to shift its blame or antagonistic focus from Mr. Henry Dalton, the family patriarch, to Mary Dalton, his daughter, as her naiveté, privilege, and selfishness seem more of the film's focus than the institutional racism (symbolized by Mr. Dalton in Wright's book) that creates and manipulates Bigger. The film makes it very clear that it is Mary who is the naturalistic or existential hand puppeteering Bigger as opposed to Wright's presentation of a more all-consuming naturalistic/existential world shaped by the men like Henry Dalton who puppeteer every heinous move while simultaneously being able to wash or launder themselves clean through acts of philanthropy. In Wright's *Native Son*, the good, white knight Henry Dalton is clearly shown as the slumlord who owns the housing project where Bigger's family lives. In HBO's "adaptation," while Mary denounces her father for being a "capitalist," the bulk of the force driving Bigger is embodied in Mary, not Henry. To be clear, it is not an issue of choosing one antagonist over another that bothers me but simply an issue of remaining true to Wright's identification of the ultimate antagonist. Yet, the film cannot remain true to Wright's notion of the ultimate antagonist if it is afraid to look unflinchingly at Bigger. So, returning to Baldwin's critique of *Native Son* and his contradictory assertion about his own father, one wonders if it is Baldwin who was being myopic in his assessment of Bigger. Possibly in this, Wright is more nuanced and artistically courageous than Baldwin, Parks, and Johnson as he stated:

The more I thought of it the more I became convinced that if I did not write of Bigger as I saw and felt him, if I did not try to make him a living personality and at the same time a symbol of all the larger things I felt and saw in him, I'd be reacting as Bigger himself reacted: that is, I'd be acting out of *fear* if I let what I thought whites would say constrict and paralyze me.

Furthermore, this "adaptation" may be just another example of writers and studios that are unable to create their own work so they pillage and plunder the work of others, impregnating the work with their own political aspirations while destroying the work's original political aspirations. As Tillet states, "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." So, is this an "adaptation" of Wright's work or "fantasy fan fiction" in which the writer, Parks, and director, Johnson, are merely using the old smoke and mirrors, bait-and-switch in which they use Wright's framework

and notoriety to get our attention as they tell a completely different story? Bigger is one-dimensional because that is Wright's commentary on what America tends to do to black minds and bodies. As Wright, himself, explained:

The Bigger Thomases were the only Negroes I know of who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least for a sweet brief spell. Eventually, the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price. They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken....But, because the blacks were so *close* to the very civilization which sought to keep them out, because they could not *help* but react in some way to its incentives and prizes, and because the very tissue of their consciousness received its tone and timbre from the strivings of that dominant civilization, oppression spawned among them a myriad variety of reactions, reaching from outright blind rebellion to a sweet, other-worldly submissiveness.

If one disagrees with Wright's socio-political and artistic notion, then one creates one's own story as Baldwin did. Baldwin disagreed with Wright and created his own art. One should not, however, mangle Wright's story to disseminate a completely different point or message, especially since Baldwin's well-drawn, even if myopic, critique of *Native Son* in "Everybody's Protest Novel" was used by the white-controlled media not as a way to have a nuanced discourse about the ways in which class, age, and socio-political ideology impact one's aesthetic ideology, but used mostly to "blow up [Baldwin's] differences with [Wright] in their bid to divide and rule" (J. Wright). According to Julia Wright, daughter of Richard Wright, Baldwin "chuckled and agreed" when she asked him if his critique of *Native Son* had been used by whites mostly to divide and control two black stars. Thus, the real crime is the manner in which the media and many college professors have used Baldwin's critique to marginalize, if not erase, Wright's legacy as it flattens Wright's work and Wright into this one-dimensional thing that has never been true of Wright or his work. Bigger is not the only story and image of blackness that Wright provided; yet, this need to reconcile *Native Son* to Baldwin's criticism seems to suggest that Bigger and *Native Son* are the be all and end all of Wright's commentary, which serves to justify the East Coast white liberal desire to demonize and remove Wright from the canon of great American works simply because it questions, much like the last segment of *Black Boy*, the history and goodness of the northern white liberal. Ultimately, based on this Tillet's article and the film, HBO's Bigger is more akin to the *Outsider's* Cross Damon, which would be a positive happenstance if I believed that HBO or the writer, Parks, and director, Johnson, valued Wright's catalog enough to display the genius of Wright's artistic nuance. However, this conflating Damon to Thomas is, likely, more about the notion that for HBO, Parks, and Johnson, Wright is viewed as an outdated, monolithic, one-dimensional artist whose work can only be saved by gutting it as much as possible rather than allowing it to stand as an indictment and query to white America. Yet, white America does not like to be queried or indicted by black intellect, and there seems always to be black people who are willing to do what they can to pacify the feelings of northern white liberals to the detriment of honest dialogue and critique.

Additionally, from a purely aesthetic sense, I have an issue when people change the narrative of an earlier work. I think that is just the trend of lazy creatives not being able to create their own stories so they pervert someone else's story for their own benefit because, again, they

were too lazy or simply not creative enough to develop their own story. For instance, while I think that *Into the Spider-Verse* is a good film, I don't like the reframing of the Peter Parker narrative. If you want to tell your own story or create your own black hero, do that. But don't steal or pervert someone else's work because you are too lazy to do so. (I know that I'm in the minority with my position, but that's my position.) That being said, making the Thomases a "middle class" family is not Wright's story. That's somebody else's story. As such, someone is merely pimping Wright's name and work to tell their own story. Artistically, that's just something that bugs me. I don't know if it also relates to how I feel about sampling, but, again, people should create their own work rather than pillaging and plundering other people's work. To be clear, we know that all art is metatextual. That is—all art is speaking to and/or responding to earlier work. But, there is a distinct difference between speaking and responding to work as opposed to co-opting or colonizing a work like a Trojan horse to make a completely different statement, which is what HBO's adaptation of *Native Son* seems to be doing. On the other hand, I've written two short stories, "Black Music" and "DDT," that respond to, are speaking to, Prince's *Dirty Mind* and *Purple Rain* (the film), but their goal is not to refashion Prince's work for my own message but to take one aspect of the previous works' notion, "what type of music should black people create?," and develop a story that engages that issue. As such, Funkadelic's "Who Says a Funk Band Can't Play Rock" is also a work to which my two short stories are responding. Moreover, I always wanted to rewrite *Under the Cherry Moon* with the female lead being mixed/mulatto because the plot is ripe with and full of commentary about race. (Much of the humor with and about Christopher (Prince) and Tricky (Jerome Benton) is about race, class, and skin complexion.) Yet, I was never able to determine a way that I could rewrite it without my work being merely a rip-off of *Under the Cherry Moon*. Thus, I never attempted the project. So, again, from a merely aesthetic sense, I'm finding myself losing respect for another writer and director who couldn't create their own work and merely used someone else's work to make a completely different socio-political statement. HBO's *Native Son* isn't a "poorly crafted" film, but it does show that culture vultures come in all shades.

#### Works Cited

- Baldwin, James. "Everybody's Protest Novel." *African American Rhet.files.WordPress.com*. 2011. <https://africanamericanrhet.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/jamesbaldwinprotestnovel.pdf>. April 15, 2019.
- Baldwin, James. "Everybody's Protest Novel." *Notes of a Native Son*. Beacon Press, 2012.
- Baldwin, James. *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket DVD*. California Newsreel, 1989.
- Tillet, Salamishah. "A *Native Son* Reimagined, with James Baldwin in Mind." *The New York Times*. April 4, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/04/arts/television/native-son-hbo-james-baldwin-suzan-lori-parks.html>. April 6, 2019.
- Wright, Julia. "Native Son As They Lay Dying." *Narrative.org*. April 11, 2019. <https://www.narrative.org/post/as-they-lay-dying>. April 14, 2019.
- Wright, Richard. "How 'Bigger' Was Born." *Xroads.Virginia.edu*. <http://xroads.virginia.edu/>

~ma01/white/anthology/bigger.html. Accessed April 15, 2019.

Wright, Richard. *Native Son: And How Bigger Was Born*. Perennial, 1993.

Wright, Richard. *Richard Wright: Later Works: Black Boy (American Hunger), The Outsider*. Library of America, 1991.

\*McInnis is an English instructor at Jackson State University, the former editor/publisher of *Black Magnolias Literary Journal*, the author of eight books, including four collections of poetry, one collection of short fiction (*Scripts: Sketches and Tales of Urban Mississippi*), one work of literary criticism (*The Lyrics of Prince: A Literary Look at a Creative, Musical Poet, Philosopher, and Storyteller*), one co-authored work, *Brother Hollis: The Sankofa of a Movement Man*, which discusses the life of a legendary Mississippi Civil Rights icon, and the former First Runner-Up of the Amiri Baraka/Sonia Sanchez Poetry Award. His work has appeared in *The Southern Quarterly*, *Konch Magazine*, *Bum Rush the Page*, *Down to the Dark River: Anthology of Poems about the Mississippi River*, *Black Hollywood Unchained: Essays about Hollywood's Portrayal of African Americans*, *Black Gold: Anthology of Black Poetry*, *Sable*, *New Delta Review*, *Black World Today*, *In Motion Magazine*, *MultiCultural Review*, *A Deeper Shade*, *New Laurel Review*, *ChickenBones*, *Oxford American*, *Journal of Ethnic American Literature*, and *Red Ochre Lit*.