

Are People of Color Black Literature's New Border Guards?

*I and others have noticed that writers of Indian ancestry and other people of color have been appointed literary border guards for Black literature. I'm writing an article raising the question about whether some Indian intellectuals have been chosen by the White establishment to act as literary border guards (the latest ethnic group to hold that position) determining which Black writers will get a pass and which ones whose papers will be rejected. Two of those who were chosen by publications to take down my play, "The Haunting of Lin Manuel Miranda," were of Indian ancestry, and a poem of mine was rejected by an Indian editor at the Paris Review. It was later published by the Academy of American Poets in its "Poem of the Day" series. I got a better break when a White man, Lorin Stein, ran the Paris Review, whose publisher is now Mona Simpson, a writer whom Al Young and I published in the 1970s when she was a student. This Indians bashing of Black writers might have begun when Pankaj Mishra mishandled the work of the great Richard Wright. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/books/review/james-baldwin-denounced-richard-wrights-native-son-as-a-protest-novel-was-he-right.html?searchResultPosition=1> I asked some prominent critics, Black and Indian, to respond: C.J. Singh, Jerry Ward and Julia Wright, daughter of the great man responded; Ayana Mathis, a novelist, criticized "Native Son" in the same issue of The New York Times where Pankaj Mishra's takedown appeared. They formed a sort of literary tag team. Julia Wright responds to Ayana Mathis as well. Rishi Nath's response appears in a separate article," *On Both Sides of the Gate.*"*

Dear Ishmael,

I find it offensive that Pankaj Mishra believes the so-called protest novel is "soldered to a Manichaeian notion of good and evil." Wright did not have a one-dimensional mind, and he was aware that protest is an action not a genre. Protest appears in many genres, and Faulkner and Lillian Smith were as devoted to protest as any non-Black writer might have been. Confusing protest and genre is a hot mess. All I will say about Ayana Mathis's participation in the 2015 conversation is that she seems to underestimate how literature resonates in real-time.

Thus, I commend you for lighting the fire for another, much-needed conversation about the crimes which white institutions commit with alacrity. Your projected article will call them out. Do stress **some**

Indian intellectuals. Protect yourself against claims that you are playing with stereotypes. Despite my knowing that some Indian teachers at HBCUs have utter disdain for African Americans and deserve to be stereotyped, I caution against your doing so.

Write with gusto,

Jerry

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/books/review/james-baldwin-denounced-richard-wrights-native-son-as-a-protest-novel-was-he-right.html>

Greetings Ish,

Thanks for alerting us.

Feel free to say you interviewed me for your article and do quote me on the following points if you feel it to be relevant (I always like to point out I am Wright's daughter but not a scholar).

1) No, Mathis is wrong. RW did not write *Native Son* for a white audience only but for a black audience as well, for blacks in denial of the problem or who were still afraid to use "words as weapons". He also wrote to tear off the white mask from the black bourgeoisie - the "house niggers" as Malcolm X would later call them.

2) No, Bigger is not a "grotesque portrait of black people" or "a miserable and incompletely realized creature (...) without agency". He evolves into understanding why he killed in a society engineered to manufacture his guilt. So, on the contrary, Bigger's humanity is bigger (yes, Wright paid attention to the choice of names) than Mathis dreams of: a magnificent enduring creation akin to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* where a "monster's" initial innocence and capacity of love is greater than what the society that rejects him is capable of.

3) Does Ms. Mathis know that *Native Son* is the first book borrowed in prison libraries throughout our nation? Does she know that *Native Son* was prescribed reading for the Black Panther Party? Or is her research "circumscribed" to suit her *a priori*?

4) I think it's more complex than just one nationality against another but a question of using social contradictions and of fomenting rivalry within the same class—here pitching a group of ethnic writers against another group of ethnic writers, an old Cold War tactic. The effort to erase Wright's message has long been so orchestrated and programmed that COINTELPRO tactics were used against him even before the official birth of this counterintelligence program. One of those tactics is clearly to divide to conquer - to try to create competition between black stars. So the best tactic is to get a black/brown peer to attack another black/brown peer. It is a question of "cancer of betrayal" to quote Amilcar Cabral's powerful words about the death of one of my father's friends, Kwame Nkrumah.

5) There are several shades of Baldwin (that is the working title of my chapter on him in my memoir-in-progress). But, as you know, after my father's death he went public with a poignant *mea culpa* about much of what he previously said about Wright and I visited Jimmy on his deathbed.

Ish and all, you may quote from the above as you see fit.

I will be sending you my BLM piece as soon as I come up for air - as you know Mumia's state is critical.

Peace,
Julia

Ishmael,
Reading your novels led me to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing, long after I had earned a PhD in Psychology at Stanford. I arrived at Stanford in 1958 and one of my first friends was a grad Engineering student from Ghana. At that time students from India to the US were limited as were students from all of Asia according to the 1924 Asian Exclusion Act.

The hostility at Stanford against the few Indian students became very open by White American students, professors, and staff who were repeatedly asking us after earning the degree, "When are you leaving?"

Only in 1965 was the limit removed and annually thousands of Indian engineers, physicians, scholars were admitted on "green cards." (Currently, the Indian American population is over 3 million or above 1%.)

I all along felt empathy for African-Americans and students from African countries. As a psychologist, I also observed some Indians because of their inferiority complex vis-a-vis Whites held negative views on people of African descent. The most notorious among them was V. S. Naipaul.

Ishmael, your literary achievements as a major novelist, dramatist, and much appreciated mentor of numerous creative-writing students merits a Nobel Prize. --- "c. j."

I fully agree with Ishmael Reed's objection to Pankaj Mishra's "take-down" of Richard Wright's excellent literary accomplishments.

I graduated at an early age with "first-class honors" (British designation) in English Literature from Punjab University, north-west India. Actually, it was exclusively British Literature.

Later, as the organizer and moderator of the first All-India University debates, I was invited to be a nominee to Oxford University by the British embassy in India. I declined the offer as I had watched hundreds of Hollywood films and wanted to go to California. Here's what the British embassy head said to me: "California, do they have a university there?" The professors of English Literature in Punjab and other Indian Universities were equally contemptuous of American literature. Never mentioned Mark Twain. Made fun of "childish American names of towns such as Kitty Hawk." (Much of this is included in my short story "His One-Day Jesus," published in Zyzzyva literary magazine.)

The point I am trying to make is the British colonization of India messed up some Indian authors and critics. V.S. Naipaul and Pankaj Mishra are two examples. Nobelist Rabindranath Tagore is an exception.

CJ.