

Review

The cultural logic of racism in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

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Richard Wright in his astonishing novel, *Native Son* (1940) has created a controversial world shocking the sensibilities of both Black and White America by presenting the cultural and logical realities behind racism that has been a matter of question in the United States for centuries. In fact, race differences and prejudice attitudes always caused problem whenever Black and White wanted to unite and live together because the racial stereotypical picture held in both groups' mind/logic, made them act in a prejudice way that gave harm to both groups/cultures. Thus, this study aimed to discuss how the racial stereotypical picture held in both groups' mind became destructive and double-edged racism by focusing on racism, race prejudice, fear, anger, cultural conflicts and cultural logic of racism in Wright's *Native Son*.

Key words: Richard Wright, native son, racism, race prejudice, cultural logic.

INTRODUCTION

Complexity of racism

For centuries racism has been a matter of question in the United States, and race differences and prejudice attitudes always caused problem whenever Black and White wanted to unite and live together because the racial stereotypical picture held in both groups' mind/logic made them act in a prejudice way that gave harm to both groups/cultures. Aiming to discuss how the racial stereotypical picture held in both groups' mind became destructive and the (omit article) double-edged racism, Richard Wright's *Native Son* will be analyzed focusing on racism, race prejudice, fear, anger and logic of racism in the white and the black worlds of America.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has called America a "fundamentally racist society" (Cheney, 1991) and in his novel *Native Son* (1940), Richard Wright shows the workings of such a society at the level of personal interaction. Wright emphasizes the psychological impact of race logic on African Americans, receiving praise, as Irving Howe wrote, for bringing "out into open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture" (Moore 1951). But Wright's work set in the 1930s, a time when Whites enjoyed socioeconomic advantages over blacks also

shows how race logic harms white American society. In tracing the psychological, intellectual and physical journey of Bigger Thomas, Wright shows that although Thomas is of an oppressed race and the Whites he encounters are members of an oppressing race, both live in fear because of what Robert Guthrie has called the Whites' "guilt-hate-fear complex" (Guthrie, 1970) and the Blacks' "fear-hate-fear complex" (Guthrie, 1970). Wright's book dramatizes these complexes that serve to sabotage the good intentions of Americans on different sides of the color line who attempt to cross it. *Native Son* also illustrates the different spaces in which whites and blacks live, and, as Steve Pile and Michael Keith have written, the "spacial logic" controls the groups' mutual perceptions (Pile and Keith, 1993). Namely, the "special logic" controlling the mutual perception shapes the cultural logic of a stereotypical picture drawn from a prejudice and double edged destructive racist perception. In other words, *Native Son* illustrates that racism is destructive to both whites and blacks, although for different reasons. White characters in the novel, particularly those with a self-consciously progressive attitude toward race relations, are affected by racism in subtler and more complex ways. Although, the Daltons, for instance, have made a fortune out of exploiting blacks, they present

themselves as philanthropists committed to the cause of black Americans. Actually, the whites, unaware of their own deep-seated racial prejudices, maintain this pretense in an effort to avoid confronting their guilt that leads to fearful attitudes. Blacks, on the other hand, unable to express themselves with words and economical power use their physical power in an effort to avoid confronting their fear that leads to violent reactions.

ASTONISHING AND CHALLENGING PICTURE OF RACISM

Generally, due to race prejudice, then, both manifestly racist as well as "progressive" whites effectively transform blacks into their own negative stereotypes of "blackness," seeing them as harmful while blacks see whites as overpowering and hostile forces. In fact, whites and blacks both fail to conceive each other as individuals because they are bound by the "cultural logic of racism." Namely, the culture both whites and blacks have grown up have shaped the logic/understanding of the concept of racism that culturally, logically, physically and psychologically formed negative images/stereotypes in the mind of both groups. Thus, both groups with the cultural logic of racism perceived each other as frightening and untrustworthy. To deconstruct this cultural logic of racism, and to perceive others as individuals, not merely as members of a stereotyped group, both blacks and whites have to sympathize with each other. However, only after Bigger meets Boris Max (the public prosecutor) does he begin to perceive whites as individuals, rather than as racial stereotypes. Throughout the novel, Wright illustrates the ways in which white racism forces blacks into a pressured and dangerous state of mind. Blacks under the oppression of poverty are forced to act subserviently before their white oppressors, while journalists consistently portray blacks as animalistic brutes. Under such conditions, the cultural logic of racism forces Bigger to react with violence and hatred towards both whites and blacks because of fear.

Native Son opens with Bigger's mother's and sister's angry voices and the harsh clang of an alarm clock. The angry voices awaken Bigger. He lives in a one-room apartment, along with his sister, mother, brother, and a "rat." This "rat" is important because in the first scene Bigger and Buddy trap a black rat and kill it. This action is symbolic for the entire novel in which Bigger, like the rat, will be hunted down and destroyed. Bigger is always penniless and hates white people because he feels trapped and different in a world arranged according to white laws and boundaries. He wants to be rich, powerful, and free, but is trapped in a narrow area of the city on its south side. "It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice" (Wright, 1940). He feels alienated, as David Sibley writes, "belonging and not belonging to a certain space" (Sibley, 1995). Bigger's hatred arose not only of Whites but also of Blacks and even his family

because he can only obey, not choose that lures him into limitation. Bigger was not satisfied with the place he was forced to live in, therefore the thought of limitations maddened him and physical boundaries made him aggressive.

Wright illustrates how racist physical boundaries induce Blacks to take out aggressions on one another. Because of their insular lives Blacks "felt that it was much easier and safer to rob their own people because the white policemen never really searched against other Negroes who committed crime against other Negroes" (Wright, 1940). Thus, they are allowed to commit crime in their own culture but when they try to cross boundaries they are punished. The Whites' world is a forbidden territory. Wright illustrates Blacks' limitation when Bigger and his friend Gus meet on a south side street while they are leaning against a building, comforting themselves in sunshine warmer than their one-room apartments. They suddenly notice a skywriting plane spelling out something. They cannot see it clearly but Bigger gazes in childlike wonder and says: "God I would like to fly up there in that sky" (Wright, 1940). Actually, he wants to be free in a wide space, he wants to get out of his narrow place. Then he remembers his place and expresses his resentment in dialogue with Gus:

They do not let us do anything. Who? The white folks. You talk like you just now finding that out. Naw. But I just cannot get used to it. I swear to God I cannot. I know I ought not to think about it, but I cannot help it. Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we did not. They do things and we cannot. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I am on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence (Wright, 1940).

Bigger uses binary oppositions to set out all the black and white differences and the limitations brought by the spatial logic starting from childhood. Whites are free, but he feels he is in jail. Later he really will be put in jail by that society he resents. Moreover, he is only allowed to see the outside world through a knot-hole. This very limited opportunity caused anxiety and aggressiveness on the surface but deep inside he is feared. Thus, Bigger, by experiencing the hazards of the culture he lives in, becomes an accidental killer, although before he becomes an accidental killer he first becomes the victim of racism culturally structured and the socially bounded. In other words, because Bigger has grown up in a culture that proscribes Blacks and Whites interacting not on friendly terms. Bigger assumes that white people's, acts of kindness to him is something to be feared rather than to be flattered. He is so controlled by such a cultural logic that when Jan offers his hand to shake he is shocked:

Jan smiled broadly, and then extended an open palm toward him. Bigger's entire body tightened with suspense and dread. Jan's hand was still extended. Bigger's right hand raised itself about three inches, then stopped in mid-air. 'Come on and shake,' Jan said. Bigger extended a limp palm, his mouth open astonishment. He felt Jan's fingers tighten about his own. He tried to pull his hand away, ever so gently, but Jan held on, firmly, smiling. 'I will call you Bigger and you will call me Jan' (Wright, 1940).

Bigger is astonished and cannot understand why Jan is acting like this. And why is Mary responding to him as if he were a human and as if he lived in the same world as she? Bigger's background has not prepared him to accept being treated as a human. He is shocked by fair racial treatment and is unable to respond to them as individuals, only as white people. Mary and Jan assume that Bigger will welcome their friendship, not realizing that Bigger has been conditioned to react with suspicion and fear.

Ultimately, Wright portrays the vicious circle of racism from the white perspective as well as from the black one, emphasizing that even well-meaning whites exhibit prejudices that feed into the very same black behaviors that confirm the racist whites' sense of superiority. Also, when Jan drives the car with Mary in the passenger seat, Bigger hesitates and feels himself trapped between these two white people. He is so shocked that, ironically, he feels himself less free than when he was trapped in his one-room apartment. As Wright explains, "he could have made all this very easy if he had simply acted from the beginning as if they were doing nothing unusual. But he did not understand them; he distrusted them, really hated them. He was puzzled as to why they were treating him this way" (Wright, 1940). The unusual behaviors created hesitations and fear that was astonishing and challenging for the culturally shaped logical mental picture of racism.

DESTRUCTIVE CULTURAL LOGIC OF RACISM

White people's compassion for him makes Bigger uncomfortable because of the society he grew up in. It is the society and his environment that shaped his cultural logic of racism and sense of himself. Bigger knows that Negroes have been represented negatively in white culture and have been treated very differently, therefore Jan's and Mary's behavior contrasts with the stereotype image in Bigger's mind. Our reception and acceptance of stereotypes, "images of things we fear and glorify," according to David Sibley, is a necessary part of our coming to terms with the world (Sibley, 1995). Bigger shows this process, however, it is not easy; in his case it proves impossible. He is shocked, unable to understand the act of Jan and Mary, since they are whites acting contrary to his stereotype of whites' acting hostilely towards blacks or limiting their space. This is his cultural

logic of race. Bigger's fear and anxieties mount as his stereotype of white people is confounded by Jan and Mary, who violate the racially ordered world in which blacks are at the margins of the society.

In fact, because of lack of communication, interracial interaction in *Native Son* leads only to exploitation and violence. When Bigger, as a black individual, enters into the forbidden white territory/space, it results in him accidentally killing a white girl. When Whites enter the Blacks' space it is to earn money, space and power in order to control the Blacks. Neither side can see the other as anything but an object; all are metaphorically "blind" there is no possibility in the world of *Native Son* of people seeing one another in clear human perspective because of the mutual gap. Thus, ironically, after he murders the white girl, Bigger takes comfort in his assumption that everyone is "blind" and mutual to each other, thus no one will suspect him of murdering a white woman.

Still, Bigger, attempting to delay discovery of the crime and to avoid getting caught, takes the body to the basement and stuffs it into the furnace. This action can be interpreted in two ways. First because of his fear he wishes to get rid of the corpse of Mary and to leave no evidence behind. Second he is taking his revenge on whites, in effect saying, "you stuffed me in a one room apartment, I stuffed the dead body into a furnace." What transpires in the following portion of *Native Son*- Bigger's flight, apprehension, trial, and conviction-is significant for what it shows of Richard Wright's indictment of the destructiveness of the cultural logic of racism.

The next morning in his mother's home Bigger, wishing not to be caught, plans to implicate Jan in Mary's death. It would be easy for him because Jan is a Communist, a Red. Like African Americans, communists are marginalized, even persecuted, in American society. Ironically, the Communist Party was committed to civil rights for the black man in America in the 1930s and 1940s (Kinnamon, 1990). Later in the story, after Bigger is arrested, a communist, Boris Max, defends him. In fact Wright shows in *Native Son* that communism was closer to defending Americans' acclaimed principle of "justice for all" than was the legal justice system, afflicted by both racial prejudice and paranoiac anti-communism. As Houston Baker has written; "Communism was, in fact, an ideology that fit Wright's fundamental cultural assumptions" (Baker, 1972). And this is why Jan is the first person to hold out his hand to Bigger, in order to shake hands with him. Bigger's attempt to frame Jan emphasizes the ironic impact of racial logic on Bigger, which is to cut him off from potential friends.

Bigger succeeds in getting Jan arrested, but there are too many facts for Bigger to remember and too many lies for him to tell. With his first lie, Bigger feels secure from incrimination because he has covered his activities. He continues to lie when he decides to send ransom notes to Mary's parents, allowing them to think Mary had been kidnapped. However, when Britten, the detective Mr. Dalton hired to investigate Mary's murder, brings Bigger face to

face with Jan for questioning, Bigger's confidence crumbles. He goes to Bessie, his mistress, and forces her to go with him and to hide in an empty building in the slum section of the city. There he instructs her to pick up the ransom money he hopes to receive from Mr. Dalton. But when he attempts to stoke a fire he accidentally draws attention to the furnace and realizes that reporters have discovered Mary's bones. Thus, afraid of being caught and leaving Bessie behind to be found and questioned by the police, he kills her and throws her body down an airshaft. Killing Bessie, the young black woman, does not make him feel as alone and scared as when he killed Mary, the young white woman. Even Bigger Thomas realizes that murder of a white woman carries more consequences than murder of a black woman, an awareness that shows how blacks and whites are valued in a white dominated world.

Once Bigger is arrested he says nothing, even after learning that Bessie's body has been found. However, when Buckley begins to explain the crimes of rape and murder with which he is charged, Bigger protests, vigorously denying rape and Jan's part in Mary's death. Under a steady fire of questions, Bigger breaks down and signs a confession. Soon Jan testifies. Knowing Jan is a Communist, the prosecutor performs a cross-examination not only about Jan's knowledge of Bigger but about Jan's beliefs about the cultural logic of racism:

'Do you believe in social equality for Negroes?' 'I believe all races are equal,' Jan began. 'Answer yes or no Mr. Erlone! You are not on a soap box.' 'Do you believe in social equality for Negroes?' 'Yes.' 'Did you shake hands with that Negro?' 'Yes.' 'How many times have you eaten with Negroes before?' 'I do not know. Many times.' 'You like Negroes?' 'I make no distinctions' (Wright, 1940).

This questioning of the prosecutor is a condemnation of crossing racial boundaries as much as it is an investigation of Bigger. It shows race prejudice by indicting Jan simply for crossing over normally accepted boundaries of space between white and black society, for treating a black man as a human being.

However, this questioning ends when Max rises to protest the racial bigotry of the prosecutor. Then Max questions Mr. Dalton about his ownership of the high-rent rat-infested tenements where Bigger's family lives. Max asks Mr. Dalton why he charges the Thomas family a high rent. Dalton explains saying "there was housing shortage," and if he were to charge lower rent he would be unethical (Wright, 1940). Dalton represents the ruling white power structure, which maintains a ghetto system in which white tenement owners, in collusion with one another, charge black families high rents.

Finally, after various other witnesses, Bigger is called to the stand. The prosecutor gives the kidnap note to the jurors, adding it to the purse, the bloodstained knife, the blackened hatchet blade, the Communist pamphlets, the

rum bottle, the trunk, and the signed confession. As a climax the prosecutor brings Bessie's dead body into the courtroom, as evidence that Bigger had raped and murdered the white woman Mary. Confirming the subtle presence of racial logic in the judicial system, the prosecutor effectively uses Bigger's having killed Bessie, a black woman, merely as evidence that Bigger was capable of killing Mary, the only victim recognized by the criminal justice system portrayed in *Native son*.

In defense of Bigger, Max does not call any of his own witnesses or cross-examine the prosecution's witnesses. Instead he, as sole witness for the defense, gives a long speech, outlining an entire social structure, its effect on an individual such as Bigger, and Bigger's particular inner compulsions when he killed Mary Dalton. Pleading for mitigation on the grounds that Bigger is not totally responsible for his crime, Max instead condemns the racist society. But with newspapers presenting Bigger as a murderous animal, he is convicted, and sentenced to death. While Bigger is returning to jail, Max promises to visit him. Later, when Bigger is at last able to talk about his crime, his feelings, and his motive, he admits that white people had thwarted him all his life, until he killed Mary Dalton. That act had released him, an ironic but by now understandable rationalization of a black person destined for racial and physical confinement. Max's attempts to delay death by appealing to the governor, but he was unsuccessful. In the last hours before his execution, Max helps Bigger to see that white American authority is itself filled with fear. Bigger can forgive them because they are suffering the same ignorance that he has suffered; they do not know the guilt of their own social crime.

CONCLUSION

Double edgeness of racism

On psychological, sociological and cultural levels, either directly or indirectly, both whites and blacks are responsible of the prejudice racist views and negative stereotypical images unconsciously drawn by both groups due to lack of communication, boundaries and fear. Bigger dramatizes the anger and pain of his race regarding "fear-hate-fear complex", and the Daltons effectively represent the ruling white power structure regarding "guilt-hate-fear complex". Thus, to be black in America means to be the victim of social values and race prejudice. Bigger Thomas's fear, flight, fate and trial dramatize American racism, its pervasiveness, and the way racism prevents social and cultural understanding or compassion for the other. Oppressors rule by force and are corrupted; victims are blind and intimidated, and are corrupted. Shortly before his death, Bigger begins to see Jan as an individual, not as a white man, but it is too late. In its exploration of America's logic of racism the novel shows that Bigger Thomas ultimately cannot escape that

logic that has been unconsciously shaped starting from childhood by elders. *Native Son* inverts the common American assumption of individual opportunity. Both Bigger's crimes and his fate merely fulfill society's expectations of him as a black man and the Dalton's attitudes fulfill the society's expectation of a white but both Bigger and Daltons are directly victims and indirectly criminals of each other because of their cultural logic of racism that makes them act in a blind and prejudice attitude.

Consequently, the effect of cultural logic of racism was double edged because both groups were imprisoned corrupted by the social and cultural understanding that prevented individualistic intercourse between the Whites and Blacks. Namely, the cultural logic of racism that was socially and culturally shaped, and the race prejudice was far more than skin deep matter because the attitudes of both groups were the result of their unconsciously painted stereotypical picture that victimized and limited their relations. Thus, whenever black and white intend to unite there will be a fight and cultural corruption unless changes occur in the cultural logic of racism.

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