

STUDY GUIDE

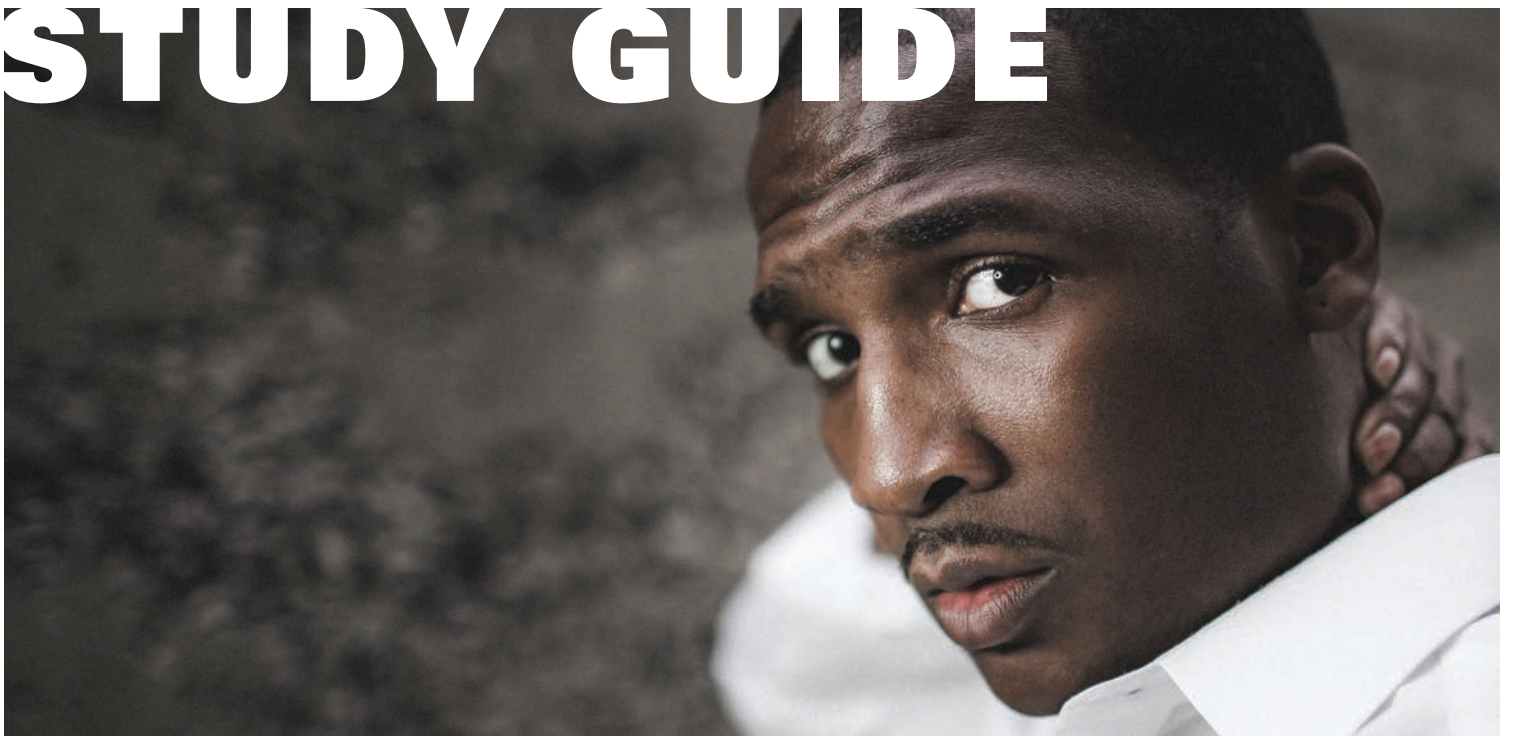


Photo of Jerod Haynes by joe mazzal/brave lux, inc

NATIVE SON

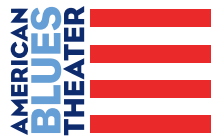
adapted by **NAMBI E. KELLEY**

based on the novel by **RICHARD WRIGHT**

directed by **SERET SCOTT**

Sept. 11 - Oct. 12, 2014

Co-produced with



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Native Son

adapted by Nambi E. Kelley

based on the novel by Richard Wright

SETTING

Two cold and snowy winter days in December 1939

Chicago's Blackbelt and surrounding areas

CHARACTERS

Bigger

A 20 year old, African-American male from the South Side of Chicago. He has dreams of being a pilot but struggles with making that dream a reality as a result of his environment, race and economic circumstances.

The Black Rat

He is the visible representation of Bigger's inner thoughts.

Mary

The rebellious, White daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Dalton. She desires to befriend Bigger while also maintaining her power and privilege over him.

Jan

Mary's boyfriend, involved with the Communist Party.

Hannah

Bigger's mother. Lost her husband, Bigger's father, in a riot and now struggles to care and provide for Bigger and his siblings.

Buddy

Bigger's younger brother. He looks up to Bigger and, resultantly, often helps Bigger with his schemes.

Bessie

Bigger's girlfriend, a maid, who attempts to help Bigger while he is on the run from the police.

Mr. Dalton

Owner of the South Side Realty Company. He owns the apartments where Bigger and his family lives. Bigger eventually becomes the chauffeur for Mr. Dalton's household.

Mrs. Dalton

The blind wife of Mr. Dalton and Mary's mother.

Britten

The private investigator the Dalton's hire to find Mary.

Vera

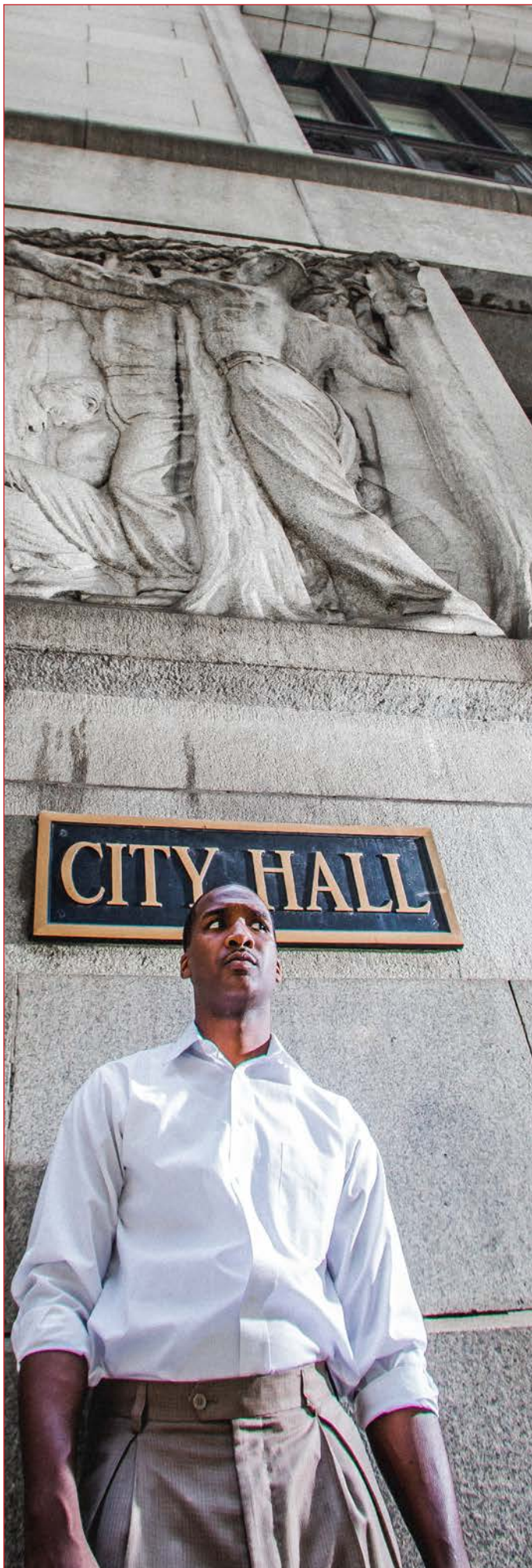
Bigger's younger sister.

Gus

Bigger's friend. They have an antagonistic relationship with each other, at times, since Gus unconsciously makes Bigger aware of his insecurities and fears.



Costume rendering by Melissa Torchia.



SYNOPSIS

Bigger Thomas has dreams. Dreams of being a pilot and of being something more than what his circumstances as a young, Black man living on the South Side of Chicago in the late 1930s would allow. In order to help his struggling mother and siblings, he accepts a chauffeur job in the home of a wealthy, White family in the Hyde Park area of Chicago. Bigger's dreams are suddenly cut short when he accidentally kills the daughter of the family and must go on the run from the police. This adaptation, based on the classic novel, *Native Son*, by Richard Wright, tracks the societal circumstances that led to Bigger's fateful killing of Mary Dalton and his attempts to evade capture by the police.

THEMES

1. **Fate vs. Free Will:** debating whether or not Bigger was a victim of fate or his own free will is a major discussion/ debate in both the novel and this adaptation.
2. **Race and class:** *Native Son* chronicles the distinct racial and class divides between Blacks and Whites in Chicago during the 1930s and the effect that has on each group's understanding and compassion for one another.
3. **Religion:** Bigger finds himself at odds with the religion he grew up with as he attempts to reconcile his actions and his fate.
4. **Fear:** this adaptation illustrates how fear became the main emotion behind Bigger's actions.
5. **Power/lessness:** The adaptation also focuses on power and privilege and how one person's power can bring to light another person's powerlessness.
6. **Double-consciousness:** an idea that comes from W.E.B. Du Bois in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, that explains how people of color often have to learn to navigate their own culture while also learning to navigate the institutionalized systems of dominant culture. The playwright of this adaptation adds a character into the play, the Black Rat, who speaks the inner thoughts of Bigger, which are often very different than the ones he speaks. The Black Ray symbolizes, in many ways, this idea of double-consciousness.

RICHARD WRIGHT AND THE NOVEL *NATIVE SON* →

This play is an adaptation, written by Nambi E. Kelley, of the novel, *Native Son*, by Richard Wright. Richard Wright (1908-1960) is the literary icon behind the novel *Native Son*. Born in Mississippi, his travels and experiences heavily influenced his writings. For example, Wright knew of life in Chicago (as seen in *Native Son*) through the first hand knowledge he gained when he moved to Chicago in 1927, where he worked as a postal clerk until he was laid off from his job and had to use relief (public assistance) in order to survive. Also, while in Chicago, he made contacts with the Communist Party via his extracurricular activities and eventually joined the party in 1933. Therefore, the representation of the Communist Party (as found in *Native Son*), and the way mainstream society viewed it, stems from that point in his life. As a result, the success of his writings changed the way in which society-at-large understood race, class and the politics of African Americans.

Native Son, written in 1940, tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a 20-year-old living in Chicago's South Side in the 1930s. A tome comprising of three "books," it paints a bleak picture of the present and future of Bigger by illustrating the systematic forces that oppress young, African American males in the United States. Wright, with this book, points a finger at how African Americans' oppression in the U.S., by the hands of the racial majority (in terms of politics and economic power), contributes to the self-destructive motivations and behaviors of African Americans.

Critics met the book with praise and condemnation. Some lauded its naturalism and blatant discussion of the racial divide in America, while others chastised its use of violence and its narrow focus on the African American experience.



Photo of Richard Wright.



ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Nambi E. Kelley is the adaptor for this version of this classic novel. Kelley has penned plays for the Steppenwolf Theatre and the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, and the Lincoln Center in New York. Also an actress, Nambi has worked on stage and television in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and internationally, playing opposite such artists as Phylicia Rashad, Alfre Woodard, Blair Underwood, and Patrick Swayze. Ms. Kelley has a BFA from The Theatre School at De Paul University, formerly known as The Goodman School of Drama, and holds an MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts from Goddard College in Vermont.

Photo of Nambi E. Kelley by joe mazzalbrave lux inc

PLOT OF THE ADAPTATION OF *NATIVE SON* AND NON-LINEAR STORYTELLING

The plot of this adaptation of the novel mainly focuses on the first two books of the novel *Native Son*: “Fear” and “Flight,” although it does incorporate some aspects of the third book, “Fate.” In addition, this adaptation is told in a non-linear manner. This means that although the story the play tells occurred linearly, the plot (the manner in which the playwright chooses to reveal the story) is not. The play takes place, mostly, in the head of Bigger Thomas. At the top of the play, Bigger finds himself remembering and reliving the series of events that lead to his not-in-his-head capture by the police. Starting with the murder of Mary Dalton, we see Bigger move backward and forward in time as events such as the loss of his father at young age, his beating by the police when they come to forcibly move his family out of their apartment, his broken dreams as he resigns himself to being the breadwinner for his mother and siblings, the job he must take in a wealthy family’s home, and an introduction to Mary and her communist boyfriend, Jan, all come together to create the perfect storm that leads to Bigger committing a murder.

DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS

The term originated from an *Atlantic Monthly* article of Du Bois’s titled “Strivings of the Negro People.” It was later republished and slightly edited under the title “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois describes double consciousness as follows:

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn’t bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.”

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_consciousness)

AUDIO/VISUAL RESOURCES

Here are links to videos Court Theatre created for the show. Please watch these before showing to your students. Some contain strong language.

Fear: <http://youtu.be/s25zMicbX6U>

Flight: http://youtu.be/fUGK_C7znhU

Fate: http://youtu.be/Ulumnk_jPWM?list=UUdKTsw3BbGPu8jw6x7KKhoQ

Link to a scene from the 1951 movie version of the book: <http://youtu.be/ckBvNE0qc9Y>

Links to a 2-part video on the life of Richard Wright:
<http://youtu.be/ckBvNE0qc9Y>
<http://youtu.be/rVBvKiEMmIQ>

ACTIVITIES

Word Web:

Teacher Prep:

Write the names of each character found in the play on the whiteboard/blackboard.

Students:

They will need to each come up to the board and write a word that describes a character or their circumstances next to the character. They will also need to identify (through arrows) if more than one character is connected to the same word or circumstance.

QUESTIONS

1. The Black Rat is a physical representation of Bigger's inner thoughts. Do you think the Black Rat helps or hinders Bigger's ability to make good decisions? Why? Do you ever find that you debate with yourself (either out loud or in your head) the consequences of decisions you are planning to make?
2. How would you describe the members of the Dalton household? Do you think they were innocent victims, that they had some hand in creating the circumstances that led to the murder, or both?
3. What is oppression? How do you see oppression in the story of *Native Son*?
4. What is Communism? Give specific examples of how Communism may be found in the story of *Native Son*?
5. As mentioned earlier, one of the major discussions/debates surrounding the novel (and adaptation) of *Native Son* is whether or not Bigger was a victim of fate or of his own free will. Keeping in mind some of the societal factors that affected Bigger's youth and young adulthood – do you think he was a victim of fate or his own free will? Why?
6. What are some of the similarities and differences you see between the novel *Native Son* and the adaptation *Native Son*?
7. When the novel *Native Son* was first published, people both condemned and applauded the book's representation of life for African Americans. Do you think this story should be condemned or applauded? Why?
8. Do you see themes that tie this story (written in 1940) to events that are occurring right now? If so, what are those themes and how do you see them today?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS ➔

Disclaimer for Teachers

This adaptation of *Native Son* does not address every major action of the three books that comprise the novel *Native Son*. You may choose to reveal this to your students. In addition, there are scenes in the play in which a stylized version of a rape occurs, moments of an intentional sexual encounter between Bigger and his girlfriend, as well as a sexual encounter between Bigger's mother and father. There are also several violent fights that occur during the course of the play. Please use your discretion, and care, in articulating these occurrences to your students.

Other Information:

Here is an excerpt from Richard Wright's article "How Bigger Was Born, which explains the genesis of Native Son.

The birth of Bigger Thomas goes back to my childhood, and there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could count and more than you suspect. But let me start with the first Bigger, whom I shall call Bigger No. I.

When I was a bareheaded, barefoot kid in Jackson, Mississippi, there was a boy who terrorized me and all of the boys I played with. If we were playing games, he would saunter up and snatch from us our balls, bats, spinning tops, and marbles. We would stand around pouting, sniffing, trying to keep back our tears, begging for our playthings. But Bigger would refuse. We never demanded that he give them back; we were afraid, and Bigger was bad. We had seen him clout boys when he was angry and we did not want to run that risk. We never recovered our toys unless we flattered him and made him feel that he was superior to us. Then, perhaps, if he felt like it, he condescended, threw them at us and then gave each of us a swift kick in the bargain, just to make us feel his utter contempt.

That was the way Bigger No. I lived. His life was a continuous challenge to others. At all times he took his way, right or wrong, and those who contradicted him had him to fight. And never was he happier than when he had someone cornered and at his mercy; it seemed that the deepest meaning of his squalid life was in him at such times.

I don't know what the fate of Bigger No. I was. His swaggering personality is swallowed up somewhere in the amnesia of my childhood. But I suspect that his end was violent. Anyway, he left a marked impression upon me; maybe it was because I longed secretly to be like him and was afraid. I don't know.

If I had known only one Bigger I would not have written *Native Son*. Let me call the neat one Bigger No. 2; he was about seventeen and tougher than the first Bigger. Since I, too, had grown older, I was a little less afraid of him. And the hardness of this Bigger No. 2 was not directed toward me or the other Negroes, but toward the whites who ruled the South. He bought clothes and food on credit and would not pay for them. He lived in the dingy shacks of the white landlords and refused to pay rent. Of course, he had no money, but neither did we. We did without the necessities of life and starved ourselves, but he never would. When we asked him why he acted as he did, he would tell us (as though we were little children in a kindergarten) that the white folks had everything and he had nothing. Further, he would tell us that we were fools not to get what we wanted while we were alive in this world. We would listen and silently agree. We longed to believe and act as he did, but we were afraid. We were Southern Negroes and we were hungry and we wanted to live, but we were more willing to tighten our belts than risk conflict. Bigger No. 2 wanted to live and he did; he was in prison the last time I heard from him.

There was Bigger No. 3, whom the white folks called a "bad nigger." He carried his life in his hands in a literal fashion. I once worked as a ticket-taker in a Negro movie house (all movie houses in Dixie are Jim Crow; there are

continued

movies for whites and movies for blacks), and many times Bigger No. 3 came to the door and gave my arm a hard pinch and walked into the theater. Resentfully and silently, I'd nurse my bruised arm. Presently, the proprietor would come over and ask how things were going. I'd point into the darkened theater and say: "Bigger's in there." "Did he pay?" the proprietor would ask. "No, sir," I'd answer. The proprietor would pull down the corners of his lips and speak through his teeth: "We'll kill that goddamn nigger one of these days." And the episode would end right there. But later on Bigger No. 3 was killed during the days of Prohibition: while delivering liquor to a customer he was shot through the back by a white cop.

And then there was Bigger No. 4, whose only law was death. The Jim Crow laws of the South were not for him. But as he laughed and cursed and broke them, he knew that some day he'd have to pay for his freedom. His rebellious spirit made him violate all the taboos and consequently he always oscillated between moods of intense elation and depression. He was never happier than when he had outwitted some foolish custom, and he was never more melancholy than when brooding over the impossibility of his ever being free. He had no job, for he regarded digging ditches for fifty cents a day as slavery. "I can't live on that," he would say. Ofttimes I'd find him reading a book; he would stop and in a joking, wistful, and cynical manner ape the antics of the white folks. Generally, he'd end his mimicry in a depressed state and say: "The white folks won't let us do nothing." Bigger No. 4 was sent to the asylum for the insane.

Then there was Bigger No. 5, who always rode the Jim Crow streetcars without paying and sat wherever he pleased. I remember one morning his getting into a streetcar (all streetcars in Dixie are divided into two sections: one section is for whites and is labeled-FOR WHITES; the other section is for Negroes and is labeled-FOR COLORED) and sitting in the white section. The conductor went to him and said: "Come on, nigger. Move over where you belong. Can't you read?" Bigger answered: "Naw, I can't read." The conductor flared up: "Get out of that seat!" Bigger took out his knife, opened it, held it nonchalantly in his hand, and replied: "Make me." The conductor turned red, blinked, clenched his fists, and walked away, stammering: "The goddamn scum of the earth!" A small angry conference of white men took place in the front of the car and the Negroes sitting in the Jim Crow section overheard: "That's that Bigger Thomas nigger and you'd better leave 'im alone." The Negroes experienced an intense flash of pride and the streetcar moved on its journey without incident. I don't know what happened to Bigger No. 5. But I can guess.

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."

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.

As I contemplated Bigger and what he meant, I said to myself: "I must write this novel, not only for others to read, but to free *myself* of this sense of shame and fear." In fact, the novel, as time passed, grew upon me to the extent that it became a necessity to write it; the writing of it turned into a way of living for me.

March 1940