

How Bigger Was Born Anew: Adaptation, Refiguration, and Double Consciousness in Nambi E. Kelley's *Native Son*

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This essay analyzes Nambi E. Kelley's stage adaptation of Native Son to consider the ways that African American drama is vitalized by and constituted through acts of refiguration. It sharpens particular focus on how Kelley reinvigorates Wright's novel's searing social and racial critiques by actively refiguring the Du Boisian metaphor of double consciousness. In giving new form, meaning, and use to the metaphor, Kelley's Native Son extends the debates about "the problem of the color line" that Du Bois's writing helped engender at the beginning of the twentieth century into the twenty-first and, in so doing, opens critical space to reckon with the persistent and pernicious problem of anti-Black racism.

Keywords: adaptation, refiguration, double consciousness, *Native Son*, Nambi E. Kelley

This essay takes as a central point of departure the claim that African American drama is vitalized by and, indeed, constituted through acts of refiguration. It is such acts that endow the remarkably capacious genre with any sense or semblance of coherence. *Refiguration* is notably a word with multiple significations. It calls to mind processes of representation and recalculation. It also points to matters of meaning-making and modification. The prefix *re* does important work here, suggesting change, alteration, or even improvement. For the purposes of this essay, I use *refiguration* to refer to the strategies, practices, methods, and techniques that African American dramatists deploy to transform or give new meaning to certain ideas, concepts, artifacts, and histories, thereby opening up fresh interpretive and definitional possibilities and, when appropriate, prompting much-needed reckonings. For the African American dramatist, refiguration sometimes serves as a means to index changes over time. It can also provide a way to demonstrate how, too often, the more things supposedly change, the more they in fact remain the same, particularly for Black people burdened with negotiating a ubiquitously anti-Black world. Crucial to this understanding of refiguration is the potential it creates for deeper reflection and sharper analysis. Also crucial to it are the possibilities it engenders and enables to grapple with contradictions and complexities while also offering up timely critiques.

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There is certainly no shortage of work by African American dramatists I might call on to elucidate this claim. From William Wells Brown's theatrical transformation of the abolitionist lecture in the nineteenth century to Suzan-Lori Parks's irreverent engagement with American history in the twentieth, and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's equally transgressive repurposing of Western theatrical traditions in the twenty-first, the evidence is overwhelming.¹ While a more global consideration of this robust body of work would surely prove useful and illuminating, my ambitions are much more modest here. I turn attention to a single work from the corpus of contemporary African American drama as a way to demonstrate the possibilities that engaging acts of refiguration continues to open up in and for Black theatrical practice and production.

The actor-playwright Nambi E. Kelley's 2014 stage adaptation of Richard Wright's highly influential novel *Native Son* is an especially fecund text to examine in relation to this essay's principal claim.² Premiering on the heels of another successful remaking of an influential twentieth-century novel for the stage—Oren Jacoby's 2012 adaptation of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*—*Native Son* is rich with insights about the ways African American drama often exploits acts of refiguration to investigate how the Black past and present “interact and enact continuous social, cultural, and political dialogues.”³ These insights, in part, account for why I have opted to sharpen focus on the play, as opposed to another case study. Moreover, Kelley notes that she conceived her adaptation as a “conversation between Richard Wright and W. E. B. Du Bois about the effects of double consciousness on the Black psyche.”⁴ The work thus reflects a concern with exploring how an engagement with the concept of double consciousness might help complicate interpretations of the fiction's notorious protagonist, Bigger Thomas. Of course, it is not only Wright's characters and plotlines that Kelley's dramaturgy endows with additional meanings. The metaphor of double consciousness—certainly one of Du Bois's most enduring—also accrues fresh significance through the play's considerations of it that further serve to expose its explanatory potency and potentiality.⁵

I examine how, in giving new form, meaning, and use to Du Bois's signature concept, Kelley's *Native Son* extends the debates about the conundrums of Blackness that Du Bois's writing helped activate at the turn of the twentieth century into the twenty-first. Kelley strategically deploys various acts of refiguration in the adaptation's dramaturgy that invite new ways of experiencing and assessing both Wright's fiction and Du Bois's articulation of the psychic ambivalences that African Americans in the United States perennially negotiate. In so doing, her *Native Son* powerfully prompts further considerations of what we might call, following Harry J. Elam, “The social and psychological predicament of American Blackness.”⁶ I explore how the adaptation also beckons us to reckon with the persistent and pernicious problem of anti-Black racism in American society, an especially urgent intervention given the ever-increasing and evolving appeals to

white racial resentment. Before pivoting to home in on some of the ways the script bears out these assertions, I first want to provide some additional context for the drama and briefly consider how it contributes to our understanding of adaptation as an act of refiguration.

Adaptation as Refiguration; Or, Bigger Returns

There are no doubt multiple motivations that inform the choice to adapt a work for a different medium. More often than not, what compels adapters to take on such projects is a pressing desire to yield new insights about source materials and perhaps to explore their own unique relationships to them. In an interview with Shepsu Aakhu, Kelley notably traces her fascination with Wright's novel to the moment in her childhood when she discovered that she and Bigger Thomas moved through many of the same Chicago streets. She recalls:

I was introduced to *Native Son* at age eight. I grew up in the neighborhood where the story takes place. Their address was 3700 Rhodes Ave., and my address was 3600. I picked up the book for two reasons. First I knew the street names because it was my neighborhood, and second I was introduced to Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy* in school—second grade, I think. So when I saw *Native Son*, I just assumed that it was a book for kids. It was definitely not a book for kids...but I was fascinated. I'm not even sure I understood what I was reading... it was disturbing, but I couldn't put it down.⁷

After spending many years pouring over Wright's evocative characterization and plotting, endeavoring to deepen her understandings of and connections to it, Kelley received a commission from Chicago's American Blues Theatre (ABT) to develop a stage version of the work. The project, she notes, initially proved daunting: "How do you talk to an audience that has already made up its mind about what you are doing?"⁸ The fact that so much has been said and written about Wright's text, including James Baldwin's much-studied excoriations of the piece and the various other efforts to adapt it for stage and screen, only added to Kelley's sense of reluctance and trepidation.⁹ Given her extensive experience working in the theatre, however, Kelley knew well the power of the medium to generate new interpretations and possibilities. Thus, she decided to take on the challenge, ultimately premiering her adaptation in a production co-presented by ABT and the Court Theatre in Chicago.

Helmed by the acclaimed actor-director Seret Scott, the adaptation garnered widespread interest and praise. In his review for the *Chicago Tribune*, Chris Jones called it a "gutsy, powerful, relentless, profoundly disturbing piece of Chicago

theatre.”¹⁰ Soyica Colbert echoed Jones in *American Theatre*, noting how, by shifting “focus from the environmental factors that motivate protagonist Bigger Thomas’s actions to the internal struggle that he faces,” Kelley’s adaptation “repositions the mission of the work, from an indictment of American racism to a reevaluation of how racism shapes Bigger’s humanity.”¹¹ Subsequent productions followed soon after the Chicago premiere at major regional houses throughout the United States, including the Marin Theatre Company in California, the Yale Repertory Theatre in Connecticut, and the Mosaic Theater Company in Washington, DC. With each, Kelley solidified her reputation as one of Wright’s boldest interpreters and as one of the most daring voices in the American theatre—an artist distinctly committed to embracing the process and practice of adaptation as an act of refiguration.

Adaptation, at its core, means “to alter or amend—to rework something (usually a text) from one medium to another,” Jane Barnette writes.¹² It is in the reworking and remaking of the “something” that new uses and meanings inevitably emerge. To adapt, then, is not only to alter or amend but also to refigure. It is precisely for this reason that the process of adapting a work for a new medium—and, thus, inviting new considerations of it—tends to be so fraught. In “Adapting *The Bluest Eye* for the Stage,” Harvey Young and Jocelyn Prince suggest that adaptations of literature into performance, in particular, often become subject to vigorous critique precisely because they trouble investments in the idea that “artistic media should be distinct from one another.”¹³ To many, Young and Prince write, “A narrative presented within a novel should look and sound in a way that differs from a narrative expressed within the dramatic or cinematic arts.” They add, “The attention given to the differences among media and the determination of success based upon a full exploitation of what sets each *apart* manufactures the belief that an adaptation should be materially different from its source.”¹⁴ Even still, there is an expectation that adaptations will replicate and possess the elements and qualities that made their source material unique, captivating, or compelling. Indeed, in many instances, the adaptation is praised and/or dismissed based on how accurate it is in approximating its source. A major challenge all adapters eventually face, then, is determining how to make their work at once different from and faithful to its original inspiration.

Adaptations, needless to say, reflect the interests and values of those doing the adapting. As Faedra Chatard Carpenter points out, translating a work to a new medium—especially from literature to embodied performance—requires “dramaturgical negotiations of omission and addition.”¹⁵ To be sure, whittling a four-hundred-plus-page novel down to a ninety-minute one-act play necessitates significant finessing and decision-making. Accordingly, any playwright charged with adapting a literary work for the stage often has to make cuts and changes to “best fit the context and demands of live performance.”¹⁶ Adaptation is a process with its own politics that necessitates imagination and creativity—and, as Carpenter points out, “Presupposes a number of aesthetic and political quandaries.”¹⁷ Part of

my aim in turning to Kelley's text is to demonstrate the ways that the process is driven by acts of refiguration that not only surface fresh ideas about the material but also stage urgent societal critiques.



Fig. 1: Vaughn Ryan Midder (*The Black Rat*) and Clayton Pelham, Jr. (*Bigger Thomas*) in Mosaic Theater Company's production of *Native Son*. Photograph by Stan Barouh.

Adapting Bigger, Refiguring Double Consciousness

Kelley faced multiple choices in refashioning *Native Son* for the stage. Perhaps the most important was determining how to represent Bigger's complex psychic life. In "How Bigger Was Born," Wright traces the origins of his troubled protagonist to several figures and scenes that he encountered while journeying from "a bareheaded, barefoot kid in Jackson, Mississippi" to a Black man charged with navigating the many dangers of Jim Crow America.¹⁸ He recalls five Bigger Thomases who each relished in drawing the contempt of others while rehearsing what we might call, following Tina Campt, "a practice of refusal."¹⁹ "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,” he explains.²⁰ In crafting his Bigger Thomas for the page—an amalgamation of the many Bigger Thomases, both Black and white, that he bore witness to—Wright notes he aimed to capture the character’s “dreams, his fleeting, momentary sensations, his yearning, visions, his deep emotional responses,” as well as the societal and environmental forces that causes him to act.²¹ Bigger acts, Frantz Fanon suggests, “to put an end to his tension”—the tension spurred by the world’s expectations of him.²² Among the central tasks in moving the work from page to stage was resolving how to render and reflect the textures and stakes of this tension. Du Bois’s writing on double consciousness would prove vital in this effort, opening space for Kelley to refigure this tension as twoness.²³

Kelley invents a new character, strikingly named The Black Rat, to make explicit the sense of “twoness”—that is, the sense of having “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”—that Bigger struggles to negotiate throughout the novel.²⁴ In the script’s character breakdown, The Black Rat is described as an “African American male 20s, the voice inside Bigger’s head. The physical manifestation of his double consciousness, or how Bigger sees himself through the eyes of others.”²⁵ Kelley further elaborates that The Black Rat “is the unseen man, the man within Bigger’s consciousness, his secret thoughts, the voice inside Bigger’s head.”²⁶ That embodied consciousness hovers and haunts Bigger’s actions, calling to mind what Peggy Phelan cites as theatre’s “long romance with ghosts.”²⁷ Among the many things that distinguishes theatre from other artistic mediums, Phelan writes, is its “conviction that it can make manifest what cannot be seen.”²⁸ Through The Black Rat, Kelley powerfully exploits this conviction. Of course, to cast the character solely in ghostly terms is, in many ways, to evacuate him of some of his complexities. Still, there are ways in which The Black Rat reflects one of the signal qualities of ghosts—that is, as Alice Rayner observes, they “hover where secrets are held in time: the secrets of what has been unspoken, unacknowledged; the secrets of the past, the secrets of the dead.”²⁹ Ghosts, Rayner asserts, “wait for the secrets to be released in time.”³⁰ Like Phelan, Rayner contends that “theatre is where ghosts best make their appearances and let communities and individuals know that we live amid secrets that are hiding in plain sight.”³¹ In Kelley’s *Native Son*, The Black Rat powerfully personifies the multiple secrets—namely, about the dishonesty that suffuses the discourse on race relations in the United States—hiding in plain sight, waiting to be released in time.

Even as The Black Rat appears as a fully embodied figure for audiences, the character notably remains invisible to Bigger throughout the play. This dramaturgical choice, in addition to heightening The Black Rat’s spectral qualities, further crystalizes the adaptation’s concerns with refiguring Wright’s iconic text through the lens of double consciousness. As was the case when Wright released

Native Son in 1940, Du Bois caused a stir when he first introduced his paradigm-shifting metaphor. “It was one of those events epochally dividing history into a before and an after,” David Levering Lewis writes.³² By giving language to the “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,” Du Bois demanded a reconsideration of the terms structuring the conversations about race—and, indeed, about what it means to be Black in America.³³

The character of *The Black Rat* reanimates Du Bois’s demand, calling attention to the ways in which the tensions and contradictions that the writer-activist outlines continue to afflict Black people in the United States. Although Kelley follows the novel in setting her adaptation in 1930s Chicago, her *Native Son* no doubt reaches into the present tense. The description of the play’s time reads: “A split second inside Bigger’s mind when he runs from the crime, remembers, imagines, two cold and snowy winter days in December 1939 and beyond.”³⁴ Kelley shrewdly deploys various formal strategies to dramatize the temporality of Bigger’s distressed, often convoluted thinking, including arranging the play’s many rapid-fire scenes such that they are continuous, but never chronological and, at once partial and absolute. The effect is a barrage of seemingly disjointed, bewildering impressions that call on the audience to make sense of their many fragmentary pieces. *The Black Rat* propels the audience out of the recesses of Bigger’s mind into the “now” of the “beyond.” From his first utterance in the opening beats of the play, the character bids spectators to contend with the ways that the inner thoughts that he gives voice and life to perhaps continue to resonate for them in their contemporary contexts.

Kelley foregoes starting the action of the adaptation with the famous scene that launches Wright’s novel. The blaring alarm that forces Bigger out of his slumber and awakens him to the realities of his everyday life, where the presence of an uninvited rodent galvanizes the inhabitants of the one room apartment that he shares with his family into violent action, is replaced with silence. The play’s prologue—“A Biggerlogue”—commences with the lights rising on Bigger standing alone, naked, shivering, and dripping wet. He remains silent while *The Black Rat* begins voicing his inner thoughts from the dark. “We all got two minds,” the figure asserts. “How we see them seeing us. How we see our own self. But how they see you take over on the inside. And when you look in the mirror—You only see what they tell you you is. A Black rat sonofabitch.”³⁵ It is only after *The Black Rat* curses Bigger that the latter opens his own mouth to speak, an act that betrays his desires at the outset to, as Fanon suggests, put an end to the tension of “ever feeling one’s twoness.”³⁶ *The Black Rat*’s utterances indicate that there are multiple sources for this tension—among them, the racist stereotypes that structure “how we see them seeing us” and the concomitant racist practices—aimed at marginalizing and disenfranchising Black people—that they engender.³⁷ Perhaps more significant is

the striving to no longer be of two minds, to reconcile “Black” and “American”—to, as Du Bois puts it, “merge the double self into a better and truer self” without letting “how they see you take over inside.”³⁸ Bigger spectacularly struggles with such strivings.

The opening pages of Wright’s novel attribute Bigger’s failures to achieve what we might think of as a Du Boisian “wholeness,” in part, to the bleakness of his given circumstances. To be sure, there are multiple battles awaiting Bigger as soon as he takes his first waking breath, including the confrontation with the black rat intruding on his family’s cramped quarters, threatening to rob them of what little peace they have achieved. While he is ultimately able to claim victory in that battle, using a heavy skillet and a shoe to smash the life out of the verminous interloper, it only serves to engender more seemingly unwinnable conflicts. Disgusted by her son’s puerile attempts to torment his sister Vera—he swings the brutalized rat in her face, causing her to faint—Mrs. Thomas proceeds to castigate Bigger, calling him “the biggest fool I ever saw” and questioning why she ever “birthed” him.³⁹ This yields additional maternal rebukes—most notably, about his manhood or lack thereof—and a declaration that Bigger is “just plain dumb Black crazy.”⁴⁰ While the text proposes that Bigger resents his family because he knows that they are suffering and feels powerless to help him, the reader also gets the sense that he despises them because they are relentless contributors to his misery. Trudier Harris suggests that, along with the other Black women depicted in the novel, Bigger’s mother and sister “are portrayed as being in league with the oppressors of Black men.”⁴¹ Wright, she adds, “sets up an opposition...between Bigger as a representative of something larger and freer, indeed more American, than the limitations of the Black community and the Black women as representative of a culture and way of life that would stifle such aspirations.”⁴² This opposition serves to fortify an idea that Bigger’s family is, in part, to blame for his ambivalence—and, ultimately, his violent and self-destructive actions.

While Kelley’s adaptation bears traces of the dichotomies that Wright constructs to give grounds for Bigger’s orientation to the world and his beleaguered psyche, it notably shows less interest in condemning the women in his family. Kelley splits the confrontation between mother and son featured in the novel’s opening into two scenes that she situates between several others. Gone are most of the fireworks between the pair. The only derogatory name that Mrs. Thomas—referred to in the script solely as “Hannah”—manages to call her son is a “no-countest man.”⁴³ With most of the name-calling and vitriol excised, Hannah’s request for her son to take on more work to help support the family registers as perfectly reasonable. One can, in fact, hear in her insistence that Bigger “got to be a man now” echoes of Lena Younger’s desires for her son, Walter Lee, to take his father’s place as the head of the family in *A Raisin in the Sun*.⁴⁴ Of course, as with Walter Lee, the fact of Bigger’s Blackness makes rising within or perhaps even escaping a social order

designed to oppress and dehumanize Black people an impossibility. Fueling that social order is a capitalist system that exploits Black labor and plunders Black life. It is a system in which “they own the world” and, indeed, “they own everything,” Bigger remarks.⁴⁵ It is a system in which a white family like the Daltons can achieve tremendous affluence and wealth, while the Thomases of the world are limited to working as their drivers and seamstresses and living in the shabby apartments they own. To Bigger, the Daltons are paragons of capitalism. He counts them—and the many people for whom they serve as substitutes—among the reasons for his feelings of twoness.

Interestingly, by the time an elder Dalton makes an appearance in Kelley’s adaptation, Bigger has already committed his first act of violence—murdering their daughter, Mary, by suffocating her with a pillow. Mary’s murder is, in fact, depicted in the scene that immediately follows “The Biggerlogue.” The end of the scene sees the return of The Black Rat, who appears in a mirror that Bigger cracks to repeat his earlier refrain: “And when you look in the mirror—You only see what they tell you you is. A Black rat sonofabitch.”⁴⁶ Bigger joins him in uttering the last line. The Black Rat suggests that “this is how Bigger was Born” in the final beats of the scene.⁴⁷ However, a leap back in time to a series of earlier exchanges between Bigger and Mrs. Dalton offers a different perspective on the character’s origins.

While being vetted for a second time to serve as the Dalton family’s chauffeur, Bigger has one of his closest encounters yet with the “world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” that Du Bois describes. Having lost her eyesight to what she cites as “frivolous youthful taunting during Prohibition with some bad rot gut,” Mrs. Dalton reveals herself to be particularly blind to the social and cultural realities structuring the lives of ordinary people—Black people, in particular.⁴⁸ Thus, even as she fashions herself as a progressive ally of the Black community—noting, for example, that she and her husband support the NAACP—she is quick to question Bigger’s character and, correspondingly, his capacity to avoid a similar fate as “most Black boys.”⁴⁹ Mrs. Dalton’s blindness “renders Bigger a fiction to her,” Maurice Wallace asserts.⁵⁰ In the racial fantasies that she constructs in her mind, Bigger can never be anything more than a crime waiting to happen. Although The Black Rat doesn’t make an appearance to assert as much, the sense that emerges from Mrs. Dalton’s interrogations of Bigger is that this, in fact, is “how Bigger was born.” To be sure, by the time he finds himself struggling to usher an intoxicated Mary up to her room at two in the morning, where he proceeds to kiss and then impulsively smother her, Bigger has already become fully enfolded in the white racist imaginary. This accounts for the tremendous panic he experiences when Mrs. Dalton suddenly enters her daughter’s bedroom, a space he knows no Black man should be seen at any hour. Despite knowing that the older woman cannot see him, he fears that she will fully misrecognize him as “the Black rat sonofabitch” of her—and, to be sure, his own—nightmares. While, as he remarks at one point,

he “didn’t mean to...I didn’t want to kill,” Bigger cannot escape feeling destined for violent acts.⁵¹

Wright notably presents Mary’s murder as a major turning point—one ultimately leading, in the novel, to Bigger’s imprisonment and execution. Kelley’s adaptation, however, refigures it as a prefatory act. This refiguring renders Bigger as an even more vexed and vexing character. Simultaneously, it draws greater attention to the ways in which the character seemingly becomes invigorated by the scheme he develops to thwart authorities from finding out that he murdered Mary. When questioned about the night Mary was last seen, Bigger insinuates that Jan, Mary’s avowedly Communist boyfriend, may have had something to do with her disappearance. Even while he professes to know little about Communism, Bigger quickly recognizes that “Rich folk must not like Communist.”⁵² Ultimately, he uses the hysteria caused by the perceived “Red” threat to his advantage. The mere mention of Communism to Mr. Britten, a white private investigator the Daltons hire to look into Mary’s whereabouts, is enough to exclude him, at least temporarily, as a potential suspect. The Black Rat’s “bravo” in response to Bigger’s quick thinking offers an indication of the pride he takes in his own cunning.⁵³ His self-satisfaction is short-lived, however. He returns to feeling resentful when he later discovers that the white authorities only buy his story because they determined that he is a “dumb cluck” and, thus, too stupid to devise a plan that would send the entire city chasing down multiple dead ends.⁵⁴ It is Bigger’s deep yearning to have others recognize his ability to outsmart the city’s white establishment that eventually drives him to confess to his girlfriend, Bessie, that he killed Mary. By telling Bessie about the murder, Bigger hopes that she will agree to serve as the Bonnie to his Clyde—or, perhaps, the Loeb to his Leopold. “Bonnie and Clyde. Leopold and Loeb. Bigger and Bessie,” The Black Rat remarks.⁵⁵ Bessie, afraid of what the police will do to her, concedes to hide out with her beau. This, however, proves to be a deadly decision. After she rebuffs his sexual advances, Bigger rapes then beats Bessie with a brick before dumping her body down an airshaft.

While Bigger attempts to justify his actions—“She will be crying all the time, blaming me, wanting whiskey to help her forget,” The Black Rat voices—the adaptation leaves little doubt that it is an atrocious, unjustifiable attack and killing.⁵⁶ As Kadeshia L. Matthews observes, “Bigger values Bessie only as a body, not a person or personality.” What little regard he holds for her, Matthews continues, is “contingent on [her] silence and sexual acquiescence.”⁵⁷ Bigger’s brutalization of Bessie reveals the ways he too comes to internalize racist and sexist beliefs about Black women’s sexual availability and disposability. While he does not face consequences for the violence he commits against Bessie, her mutilated body is eventually presented at trial as confirmation that Bigger sexually violated Mary before killing her.

The novel’s extended courtroom exchanges are refigured into a single,

abbreviated scene in Kelley's adaptation. Gone are the pleas that Bigger's Jewish, Communist attorney, Boris Max, makes to the court to spare his client's life. Gone too are the dozens of witnesses the prosecution calls to the stands to "prove that the killer is sane."⁵⁸ The Black Rat instead stands in for the trial's various participants, giving voice to single lines of testimony while encircling and antagonizing Bigger during the scene. "It's in my head! All of this inside my head!" Bigger exclaims in response to the swell of voices that begin chanting "Guilty / Guilty."⁵⁹ The exclamation serves to publicize his internal struggle—placing it before the community such that it can no longer be dismissed, disregarded, or ignored—and, simultaneously, to cast doubt on the reality of it and, more broadly, the entire scene. The certainty of the judgment is likewise called into question when Bigger responds by asking aloud three times, "Am I?"⁶⁰ This shift in mood from the indicative to the interrogative (and, indeed, to the messianic) powerfully reinforces the adaptation's indictments of the societal forces that contribute to Bigger's downfall. Resonant in each of Bigger's "Am I?" is another question: Are you? Kelley's acts of refiguration serve to turn Bigger's "twoness" inside out and, in so doing, invite reflection on the ways that we all have perhaps benefited from and have helped strengthen the forces that have hastened his demise.

A Flight of Fancy, in Conclusion

The various acts of refiguration that Kelley threads throughout *Native Son* surface the ways in which double consciousness, even while endowing black



Fig. 2: Clayton Pelham, Jr. (Bigger Thomas) and the ensemble in Mosaic Theater Company's production of *Native Son*. Photograph by Stan Barouh.

people with a kind of “second sight” that allows them to better understand and diagnose the nation’s many racial ills, can also produce deleterious effects. Bigger’s tormented journey reveals how the sensation of twoness can prove psychically imprisoning, hampering a person’s capacity to dream and desire differently. As he explains to his teenage brother Buddy while shooting a game of pool early in the play, Bigger wants, above all, to fly. To fly, he intimates, is to be free, to be alive—to be granted access to the rights and benefits afforded to white men in American society. Bigger ultimately comes to understand double consciousness as operating like a thief, relentlessly robbing him of his perfect vision and, concomitantly, the ability to imagine and embody the kinds of fantasies that serve to unbind Black life and people from the ubiquitous conditions of anti-Blackness. By the time he starts working for the Daltons, Bigger has fully internalized the idea that flight and escape are no longer worth imagining.

Strikingly, Kelley restores Bigger’s desires to fly in the play’s final beats. Having been cornered on a snowy rooftop by two police officers, who attack him with a high-pressured water hose, ripping the clothes off his body and pushing him to his knees, Bigger surrenders himself to death’s inevitability. The stage directions dictate that the officers handcuff him, drag his body across the roof, and prepare to drop him, feetfirst, through a trap door. The Black Rat intervenes before the execution is completed, voicing, “And when you look in the mirror—You only see what they tell you you is. A Black rat sonofabitch.”⁶¹ Bigger rejects the repeated refrain this time, countering, “Naw...A man.”⁶² It is a forceful and final assertion of his humanity, one that precipitates the officer’s releasing him to his death. A flight of fancy follows:

(Lights.)
(Fantasy.)
(BIGGER’s body suspends midair.)
(He listens for the voice inside his head.)
(But it is not there.)
*(A defiant, wry smile crosses his lips.)*⁶³

With the voice inside his head silenced, Bigger flies. Tezeru Teshome rightly cautions against reading these final moments too positively, asking, “What if the systemic, anti-Black violence that held [Bigger] captive...follows him in flight and after death? What if we read the ending of the play as a restoration of the violence that precedes and exceeds Bigger?”⁶⁴ While these are certainly questions worth exploring, so too are the ways Kelley’s inventive ending situates the adaptation in a long tradition of stories that feature Black people taking flight to pursue returns and reclaim stolen freedoms. Soyica Colbert has written incisively about how tales of the Flying African have served as potent means to “interrupt the finality

of death.”⁶⁵ Flight, Michelle D. Commander notes, is “transcendence over one’s reality—an escape predicated on imagination and the incessant longing to be free.”⁶⁶ For Bigger, flying not only becomes a means to transcend “the confines of the carceral landscape” but also to liberate his fractured psyche.⁶⁷

Liberation is no doubt the dominant subtext of Kelley’s *Native Son*. Powerfully resonant throughout the conversations the adaptation stages between Wright and Du Bois—and the acts of refiguration it necessitates—is a call to reimagine the world and to undo the anti-Black structures that have long held it captive. As significant are the insights *Native Son* yields about the ways in which, for African American dramatists (and other cultural workers), engaging and mobilizing acts of refiguration is as vital to the practice of theatre-making as it is to the process of world-remaking.

Notes

1. See, for example, William Wells Brown, *The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom: A Drama in Five Acts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001); Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994); and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, *Appropriate/An Octoroon* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2019).

2. Nambi E. Kelley, *Native Son*, December 21, 2017, production/performance draft. All references are to this version of the script. It is worth noting that Samuel French published an acting edition of the script in 2016. See Nambi E. Kelley, *Native Son* (New York: Samuel French, 2016).

3. Harry J. Elam Jr., “The Device of Race: An Introduction,” in *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, ed. Harry J. Elam Jr. and David Krasner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

4. The quote is drawn from an interview that Khalid Y. Long and I conducted with Kelley for Mosaic Theater Company’s 2019 production of *Native Son*; Long and I both served as dramaturgs for the production. See Khalid Y. Long and Isaiah M. Wooden, “An Interview with Nambi E. Kelley,” Program for *Native Son*, Mosaic Theater Company, 2019, 8.

5. As Henry Louis Gates writes, none of Du Bois’s signature metaphors “has proved more enduring than that of double consciousness,” which he theorizes and meditates on in his 1903 masterwork, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Gates elaborates: “Although Du Bois would publish twenty-two books, and thousands of essays and reviews, no work of his has done more to shape an African American literary history than *The Souls of Black Folk*, and no metaphor in this intricately layered book has proved more enduring than that of double consciousness, including Du Bois’s other powerfully resonating metaphors, that of ‘the veil’ that separates Black America from white America, and his poignant revision of Frederick Douglass’s metaphor of ‘the color line,’ which Du Bois employed in that oft-repeated sentence, ‘The problem of the twentieth-century is the problem of the color line’—certainly his most prophetic utterance of many.” The metaphor of double consciousness has maintained tremendous potency, despite the fact that, as some (including Gates) have suggested, “the idea of wholeness” that Du Bois advocated for “has largely been retired,” supplanted by postmodern investments in ideas of rupture, decentering, and fragmentation. See Henry Louis Gates Jr., “The Black Letters on the Sign: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Canon,” in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois: The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), xiv-xv.

6. Harry J. Elam Jr., *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 60.

7. Shepsu Aakhu, “An Interview with *Native Son*’s Nambi E. Kelley,” American Blues Theatre, August 5, 2014, www.americanbluestheater.com/2014/08/05/interview-with-native-sons-nambi-e-kelley/.

8. Aakhu, “Interview with Nambi E. Kelley.”

9. Kelley is not the first person to bring the stark tale of Bigger Thomas to the stage. Soon after the novel’s release, Wright began collaborating with fellow novelist and playwright Paul Green to fashion a theatrical version that would eventually land on Broadway in 1941. Several less than successful attempts to adapt Wright’s novel for the big and small screens, including a 1986 television version featuring Oprah Winfrey as Mrs. Thomas, followed. A new stage version adapted and directed

by Kent Gash premiered at Seattle's Intiman Theatre in 2006. For more on this history, see Harry J. Elam Jr., "Post-World War II African American Theatre," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Drama*, ed. Jeffrey H. Richards with Heather S. Nathans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Brooks Atkinson, "The Play: 'Native Son,' by Paul Green and Richard Wright, Put on by Orson Welles and John Houseman," *New York Times*, March 25, 1941, <https://www.nytimes.com/1941/03/25/archives/the-play-native-son-by-paul-green-and-richard-wright-put-on-by.html>; Dan Bacalzo and Michael Portantieri, "All Over the Map: *Native Son* in Seattle, *Moving Right Along* in San Francisco, and *Something You Did* in Philadelphia," *TheaterMania*, October 19, 2006, www.theatermania.com/new-york/news/all-over-the-map_9263.html; Lynn Jacobson, "Native Son," *Variety*, November 5, 2006, www.variety.com/2006/legit/reviews/native-son-1200512206/.

10. Chris Jones, "Review: 'Native Son' at the Court Theatre," *Chicago Tribune*, September 23, 2014, www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/reviews/ct-ent-0922-native-son-review-20140923-story.html.

11. Soyica Diggs Colbert, "Playwright Nambi E. Kelley Riffs on Jazz," *American Theatre*, May 16, 2017, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/05/16/playwright-nambi-e-kelley-riffs-on-jazz/>.

12. Jane Barnette, *Adapturgy: The Dramaturg's Art and Theatrical Adaptation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018), 10.

13. Harvey Young and Jocelyn Prince, "Adapting *The Bluest Eye* for the Stage," *African American Review* 45, no. 1/2 (2012): 145.

14. Young and Price, "Adapting *The Bluest Eye* for the Stage," 145.

15. Faedra Chatard Carpenter, *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 27. Like Young and Prince, Carpenter turns to Diamond's adaptation of *The Bluest Eye* to help explicate her claims about the artistic politics that often engulf stage adaptations of literature. She shrewdly outlines the various dramaturgical strategies Diamond engaged and deployed to translate Morrison's groundbreaking novel into an embodied performance that would resonate with audiences, both young and old (the production was originally commissioned by Steppenwolf for Young Adults). Perhaps most significant in and to Carpenter's examination of Diamond's reimagining of *The Bluest Eye* is the attention she draws to the process of adaptation.

16. Carpenter, *Coloring Whiteness*, 112.

17. Carpenter, 111.

18. Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," in *A Turbulent Voyage: Readings in African American Studies, Third Edition*, ed. Floyd W. Hayes III (Boston: Collegiate Press, 2000), 219.

19. See Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

20. Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," 221.

21. Wright, 229.

22. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 118.

23. See Long and Wooden, "An Interview with Nambi E. Kelley."

24. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

25. Kelley, *Native Son*, 2.

26. Nambi E. Kelley, "Notes from the Playwright, Nambi E. Kelley." These notes were originally written for the 2014 world premiere production of *Native Son* at American Blues Theater and Court Theatre. I accessed them via the Marin Theatre Company's website, where they were featured as a part of the company's 2017 production of the adaptation. See www.marintheatre.org/productions/native-son/notes-from-the-playwright-nambi-e-kelley.

27. Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

28. Phelan, *Mourning Sex*, 2.

29. Alice Rayner, *Ghosts: Death's Double and the Phenomena of Theatre* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), x.

30. Rayner, x.

31. Rayner, x.

32. David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2009), 191.

33. Du Bois, *Souls*, 8.

34. Kelley, *Native Son*, 2.

35. Kelley, 5.

36. Du Bois, *Souls*, 8.

37. Kelley, *Native Son*, 5.
38. Du Bois, *Souls*, 9.
39. Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2003), 11.
40. Wright, *Native Son*, 12.
41. Trudier Harris, "Native Sons and Foreign Daughters," in *New Essays on Native Son*, ed. Kenneth Kinnamon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 63.
42. Harris, "Native Sons and Foreign Daughters," 63.
43. Kelley, *Native Son*, 22.
44. Kelley, 22; See Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).
45. Kelley, *Native Son*, 14, 16.
46. Kelley, 8–9.
47. Kelley, 9.
48. Kelley, 29.
49. Kelley, 23.
50. Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature, 1775–1995* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 35.
51. Kelley, *Native Son*, 147.
52. Kelley, 40.
53. Kelley, 67.
54. Kelley, 91.
55. Kelley, 82.
56. Kelley, 105.
57. Kadeshia L. Matthews, "Black Boy No More?: Violence and the Flight from Blackness in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 60, no. 2 (2014): 282.
58. Wright, *Native Son*, 344.
59. Kelley, 145.
60. Kelley, 145.
61. Kelley, 150.
62. Kelley, 150.
63. Kelley, 150.
64. Tezeru Teshome, "Black Plight in Flight," in *The Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance*, ed. Kathy A. Perkins, Sandra L. Richards, Renée Alexander Craft, and Thomas F. DeFrantz (New York: Routledge, 2018), 291.
65. Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 23.
66. Michelle D. Commander, *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 7.
67. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 24.