Bigger and His Doubles
By Khalid Y. Long and Isaiah M. Wooden, Dramaturgs

Richard Wright's influential novel *Native Son* has enjoyed a rather fascinating life on stage and screen since its debut in March 1940. Soon after editor and critic Clifton Fadiman took to the pages of *The New Yorker* to herald the book as "the most powerful American novel to appear since *The Grapes of Wrath*," Wright began working with Paul Green, a white southern dramatist, on a theatrical adaptation. The collaboration between the pair was notably fraught, with the two men frequently clashing over where to assign blame for the tragic downfall of the novel's protagonist, Bigger Thomas. Nevertheless, on March 24, 1941, a year after *Native Son* became the first novel by a Black writer to be selected for the Book of the Month club, Wright and Green's stage version opened at the St. James Theatre on Broadway in a production directed by Orson Welles and co-produced by John Houseman. *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson called it "the biggest American drama of the season," adding, "Mr. Green and Mr. Wright have translated a murder story into a portrait of racial fright and hatred and given it a conclusion that brings peace to a taut, bewildered mind." It would mark the first of many forays into reanimating Wright's searing exploration of the realities of race for stage and screen audiences. Subsequent adaptations would include: a 1951Argentinian film titled *Sangre negra*, directed by Pierre Chenal and starring Wright as Bigger; a 1986 television movie directed by Jerrold Freedman and featuring Oprah Winfrey as Mrs. Thomas; a 2006 stage version adapted by director Kent Gash produced at Seattle's Intiman Theatre; as well as, a forthcoming film version adapted by Suzan-Lori Parks.

Nambi E. Kelley's *Native Son*, of course, fits within this ever-expanding genealogy. What marks her adaptation as distinctive, however, are the conversations it stages and activates about the interior lives of Black folk. Kelley notes that she imagined her script, in part, as a dialogue between Richard Wright and scholar-activist W. E. B. Du Bois regarding the effects of “double consciousness” on the Black psyche. First introduced in an essay he published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1897 titled, "Strivings of the Negro People," and subsequently revised and further elaborated on in his groundbreaking essay collection, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois wrote the following about his paradigm-shifting concept:

> [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 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 ubiquity of anti-Blackness in the United States, Du Bois observed, was not without significant material *and* psychological consequences. Energizing his writing on double consciousness was a desire to see the structures preventing Black people from thriving and progressing upended.

Kelley’s adaptation sharpens focus on the internal conflicts and "warring ideals" that Du Bois attempted to capture with his enduring metaphor. To make explicit the sense of "twoness" that Du Bois contemplates and that Bigger struggles to negotiate, Kelley introduces a new character, The Black Rat, in her version. The figure, a personification of Bigger's double consciousness,

haunts the play, waiting for the unspoken, the unacknowledged to be released in time. "We all got two minds. 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," he exclaims in the play's opening beats. Beyond giving tangible form to Bigger's inner thoughts and desires, The Black Rat reminds us of the grave dangers facing us all in the absence of a proper reckoning with the conundrum of race.

Noted philosopher and revolutionary Frantz Fanon proposes that Bigger acts in *Native Son* "to put an end to his tension." The Black Rat suggests that the youth acts so that he might finally fly. There is a long tradition within Black expressive culture of mobilizing the trope of flight as a way to imagine and, indeed, engender new horizons and possibilities beyond the limitations imposed on Black life by a racist society. What is especially remarkable about Kelley's rendering of Bigger is that, in the end, he becomes a fugitive from death. He flies. And, in so doing, he invites us to ponder what freedom means and, indeed, what it feels like.

An Interview with Nambi E. Kelley

By Khalid Y. Long and Isaiah M. Wooden

Who are the playwrights – past and present – that influence your work?

I have been deeply influenced by Goddess/Newest Ancestor Ntozake Shange. I believe my early plays were straight riffs on her voice as it was intersecting with my own. I used to really love Suzan-Lori Parks, her early stuff really ignited my creative spirit. Basically, any writers that were creating plays not set in a living room, I was all for! Plays set in living rooms also inspired me, just not as richly as the plays that were pushing the envelope as far as form, content, and theme.

In developing the adaptation, why was it important to create a character, The Black Rat, that would give voice and body to Bigger's inner life?

The Black Rat is a manifestation of W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness. In my intention to give Bigger back to his own story, as opposed to what Richard Wright crafts, which is to present Bigger to white people as what they have created, I am attempting to show you who he is from the inside. Not a beast, but a boy caught in a circumstance beyond him that had he been in a different era or time, his intelligence and problem-solving skills would have made him a C.E.O.

Richard Wright was critiqued for his depiction of Black womanhood in *Native Son* (as well as his other works). Was this an area of concern for you in adapting the work?

Thank you for this question! I saw Richard Wright's depiction of the women as a challenge to deepen the work on the adaptation. There are whole drafts that exist of my manuscript where the women have these huge monologues that take over the entire play! But my dramaturg let me know that I was writing a whole different script with those pieces, so I had to take the bare elements of them, pair them down, and use the essentials to carve out real ladies.

Why do you think contemporary audiences continue to connect so deeply with Wright's novel?

What I can speak more directly to is my work on the adaptation, which has vastly different intentions from what Wright was creating. His work was to depict Bigger the animal or beast. My work is to depict Bigger the boy. My play is a conversation between Richard Wright and W.E.B. Du Bois about the effects of double consciousness on the Black psyche. I have crafted the character of The Black Rat to speak to how Bigger sees himself through the eyes of whites, yet because ultimately a doubled consciousness is designed for our survival, The Black Rat is not the devil on Bigger's shoulder, but the survival instinct in him that fights to save his life. As it functions in my play, what is meant for someone's harm turns out to be their salvation.