



**HAL**  
open science

# Segregation and the Representation of Urban Space in Richard Wright's Native Son

Corinne Duboin

► **To cite this version:**

Corinne Duboin. Segregation and the Representation of Urban Space in Richard Wright's Native Son. Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion, 1993, 06, p. 105-114. <hal-01165814>

**HAL Id: hal-01165814**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01165814v1>**

Submitted on 10 Dec 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

# Segregation and the Representation of Urban Space in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Corinne Duboin  
Université de La Réunion <sup>1</sup>

In *Native Son*,<sup>2</sup> published in 1940, Richard Wright presents the life of a black youth, Bigger Thomas, whose violent actions — the killing of two women, his white employer's daughter and his girlfriend — are the consequences of his exclusion. Through the story of his tragic character, Wright takes us inside two topographically contiguous but separated worlds: the South Side, also referred to as “the Black Belt,” and the white neighborhoods of Chicago. We will therefore analyze the various functions of this divided *topos* to determine Wright's “ways of apprehending the locked-in life of the Black Belt areas.”<sup>3</sup>

Segregation based on race results in a clear-cut division of urban space: a black ghetto encircled by white neighborhoods. “We live here and they live there. We black and they white,” Bigger notices (58). The South Side, “a city within a city,” is an insular space in which the inhabitants have the feeling of being confined. In this limited space, conceded by the white community, the black

---

<sup>1</sup>. Université de La Réunion, Faculté des Lettres & Sciences Humaines, 15 avenue René Cassin, B.P. 7151, 97715 Saint-Denis Messag Cedex 9 (France).

<sup>2</sup>. Richard Wright, *Native Son* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983). All quotations from Wright's novel are from this edition.

<sup>3</sup>. Richard Wright, “Introduction: How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” in *Native Son*, p. 19.

population feels excluded: "Why they make us live in one corner of the city?" Bigger asks (58).

In order to communicate the idea of confinement, Richard Wright uses a series of metaphors related to images of boundaries. Bigger refers to "the line" as an invisible, while impassable, barrier erected by the white community to keep the black population within a delimited space: "He knew that black people could not go outside of the Black Belt to rent a flat, they had to live on their side of the 'line'" (288). Being shut up inside the ghetto, Bigger feels disconnected from the rest of the world to which he can never belong: "It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel I'm outside of the world peeping through a knot-hole in the fence" (38). The character perceives the spatial limits of the ghetto as the physical reminder of his social and racial exclusion, which leads to frustration. Bigger, who is a prisoner of his environment and his blackness, is doomed to stagnation, in both the literal and figurative sense of the word. The metaphor of the cage also reflects Bigger's feeling of close confinement. When the police chase him through the night, after he has murdered Mary Dalton, they surround him with powerful searchlights whose beams stand like the bars of an immaterial cage:

They wanted him. His eyes jerked upward as a huge, sharp beam of yellow light shot into the sky. Another came crossing it like a knife. Then another. Soon the sky was full of them. They circled slowly, hemming at him in bars of light into which he dared not go. (297)

This thematic use of space reflecting Wright's perception of the ghetto as an enclosed location in *Native Son* is reinforced by Wright's figurative treatment of architecture. Characteristic of housing in the ghetto is the small size of the apartments. Bigger's mother rents a tiny kitchenette for herself and her three children. In this overcrowded space, there is no privacy and Bigger cannot escape the presence of his family: "They were always too close to him, so close that he could never have any way of his own" (137). Indeed, in the Thomases' one-room apartment, everyone is permanently confronted by the stare of everyone else. Come morning, Bigger and his brother must sit with their backs to their mother and sister to avoid their nakedness while they dress, and vice versa. Commenting on this daily ritual, Dan McCall underlines that "the kitchenette throws desperate and unhappy people into an unbearable closeness and association, thereby in-

creasing latent friction, giving birth to never-ending quarrels and recrimination, accusation, and vindictiveness, producing warped personalities."<sup>4</sup>

In reaction to this physical closeness, Bigger becomes unconsciously estranged from his family. To depict this aloofness, Wright uses the architectural trope of the wall: "he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain" (48). Bigger, who lives with three other people in a tiny tenement with no partition, erects a psychological wall in order to protect himself from their spiritual agony. Thus, the only space where Bigger can take refuge from the stifling presence of his family and regain some sense of independence is the ghetto street and its poolrooms. The author creates a fictional representation of the slum tenement as a public space. This is notably illustrated by the scene in which Bigger, when fleeing the police, catches sight of three children sitting in bed, watching their parents make love. This permanent cohabitation imposed on the characters crushes their individuality.

Wright's representation of the ghetto, therefore, is based upon an ambivalence. This segregated urban area appears two-dimensional, a specificity which is reflected in the dialectic of closed and open space: within the confines of the ghetto the characters, who are secluded from white society, are forever under the scrutiny of others since even domestic space violates their privacy. The co-existence of these two antithetical realities creates an atmosphere in which one's sense of personal freedom is constantly assailed. In order to reinforce this dual image, Wright describes the Daltons' home which, by contrast, is a large and secure place. The mansion of this wealthy white family is built in a residential area:

The houses he passed were huge: lights glowed softly in windows . . . This was . . . a world of white secrets carefully guarded . . . He came to Drexel Boulevard and began to look for 4605. When he came to it, he stopped and stood before a high, black iron picket fence, feeling constricted inside . . . Other than the front gate, there was only the driveway, the entrance to which was securely locked. (82)

The Daltons' residence, which resembles an inviolable fortress protecting its inhabitants from the hostile and chaotic world outside, corresponds to a bachelardian definition of the house. In Wright's architectural imagery, the soft lights in the windows recall Bachelard's poetic analysis of light as being "an eye

---

<sup>4</sup> Dan McCall, "The Bad Nigger" in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Native Son* (ed. by Houston A. Baker, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 87.

open on the night.”<sup>5</sup> It represents both “intimacy” and “refuge.”<sup>6</sup> Once inside, Bigger discovers a comfortable home with a quiet, peaceful atmosphere: “dim lights,” “smooth walls,” and “a faint sound of piano music float[ing] to him from somewhere” (84). In such a large house each member of the family is able to preserve his or her privacy. Each one has his or her own room and can move around freely. Bigger himself has his own bedroom: “The room was large and had two radiators. He felt the bed; it was soft . . . A room all to himself! . . . He would not have to sleep with Buddy and stand Buddy’s kicking all night long” (98-9).

And though Bigger comes into contact with a new, comfortable and promising space, he cannot freely explore it. While Bigger is indeed a dynamic character, in terms of mobility, his movement through the dual space of Chicago — the ghetto and the white city — is governed by social rules he cannot transgress. His coming and going from the South Side to Drexel Boulevard where his white employer lives delineates a pendulum-like motion. For Bigger, this passage from the ghetto into the white world is a matter not of choice but of necessity, if not of constraint, since he has to work to support his family. What is more, Bigger’s space, which is already restricted, gradually shrinks throughout the novel. In Book One, Bigger and his gang make numerous trips within the ghetto, drifting through the streets, stopping at Doc’s who runs a poolroom they use as their headquarters, going to a movie theater and to Blum’s, the Jewish owner of a grocery store they plan to rob. The South Side is their territory and they know its every facet.

Then Bigger goes to his new employers’, the Daltons, who hire him as their chauffeur. While walking on Drexel Boulevard, he regrets having accepted this job in a white neighborhood: “He could have stayed among his own people and escaped this fear and hate. This was not his world” (83). Outside of the ghetto, Bigger feels unsafe and carries a gun. Once inside the house, he remains ill-at-ease in this white environment which is foreign to him: “strange objects challenged him, and he was feeling angry and uncomfortable” (84). Indeed, Bigger behaves differently according to the environment in which he finds himself. His “split personality,” linked to the codification of Chicago’s dual environment, reflects the division of space. On the South Side, his own world, Bigger moves about with confidence. He is a gang leader both feared and respected. At home,

<sup>5</sup>. “La lampe veille, donc surveille . . . Elle est un œil ouvert sur la nuit.” Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989), p. 48. All translations are mine.

<sup>6</sup>. Bachelard, *ibid.*, p. 50.

his mother has no authority over him and he always answers her back with total irreverence.

On the other hand, Bigger feels self-conscious in his relation with the Daltons and sees their house as an oppressive environment. He behaves like a timid, docile person and plays the stereotyped role of the "good nigger" or "Uncle Tom" when he first meets the Daltons:

He had not raised his eyes to the level of Mr Dalton's face once since he had been in the house. He stood with his knees slightly bent, his lips partly open, his shoulders stooped; and his eyes held a look that went only to the surface of things. There was an organic conviction in him that this was the way white folks wanted him to be when in their presence... (87)

His first task as a chauffeur is to drive their daughter Mary to her night class at the university. But the young woman asks him to take her to her boyfriend's apartment, instead. Then the three of them drive through Chicago. During this ride, Bigger covers greater distances than when he was in the ghetto. Here, however, in contrast with his own environment, he is no longer in control of his movements, since he either follows the directions Mary gives him or sits helpless next to her boyfriend Jan who drives the car. Therefore his mobility is conditioned by his social position, that of a black man subordinated to white society.

Once they are back at the Daltons', Bigger carries the drunken Mary up to her room. Fearing that her mother might find him there, he tries to silence Mary's moaning, covers her face with a pillow and accidentally smothers her. He then burns the body in the basement furnace. Book One ends with Bigger's return to the ghetto.

In Book Two, Bigger goes back to work and from there, visits his girlfriend Bessie three times. At this stage of the novel, Bigger's movements trace a single trajectory and are spurred by his fear. He repeatedly takes refuge on the South Side to avoid the tension at the Daltons' due to Mary's "disappearance." The ghetto momentarily becomes a protective space, a symbolic maternal womb. The association between the city and the archetypal image of the nurturing mother is represented through Bessie's offering Bigger a glass of warm milk.

Shortly after his third trip back to the Daltons', a group of journalists discover human bones and an earring in the ashes of the furnace. Bigger immediately runs away and hides in the ghetto. A cordon of police encircles the South Side and gradually hems him in:

He was trapped... He closed his eyes calculating: he was at Fifty-third Street and the hunt had started last night at Eighteenth Street. If they had gone from Eighteenth Street to Twenty-eighth Street last night, then they would have gone from Twenty-eighth Street to Thirty-eighth Street since then. And by midnight tonight they would be at Forty-eighth Street, or right here. (285)

During his flight, Bigger notices a rat running into a hole and identifies with it: "He looked wistfully at the gaping black hole through which the rat had darted to safety" (288). The safe space of the ghetto however closes in on him like a vise until he is trapped on a roof by the police.

In Book Three, Bigger spends most of his time confined to a minimal space either in his cell or in the witness stand during his trial. As a narrative strategy related to Wright's figurative use of space, Bigger's centripetal motion gradually spiralling down into immobility is a symbolic representation of the black urban experience. Through Bigger's characterization as the victim of a dual ostracism — geographical and social — Wright signifies that his protagonist, confronted by the alienating effects of physical segregation, cannot escape his social condition.

Just as Chicago is depicted as a city of contrasts, so the interior setting of the Daltons' house is depicted as a non-homogeneous space. Its architectural structure is indeed a metaphorical representation of the American social structure. The house rises towards the sky and its verticality is not without symbolism. It is divided into three levels: the basement; the first floor which includes the kitchen, the living-room, a study, and Bigger's room; and the second floor with the Daltons' bedrooms. This stratification of domestic space is a figurative representation of race relations in America. The first floor, to which Bigger has access during daytime, is an integrated working space. However, in order to reach his room which is on the same floor, he has to go through the basement. This back room within the house, though clearly separated from the Daltons' living space, reproduces the marginal environment of the black ghetto. The upper floor into which Bigger intrudes represents the intimate white world. As for the basement, Wright uses it as a spatial metaphor for the social position of African-Americans. On Bigger's first visit, Peggy, the white servant, showed him the cellar: "He rose and followed her out of the kitchen, down to a narrow stairway at the end of which was the basement. It was dark" (97). The images of narrowness, darkness and depth generated in the description connote the dark fate of African-Americans who are the victims of segregation.

According to Bachelard's definition, the cellar "is first of all the *dark being* of the house, the being who partakes of subterranean forces."<sup>7</sup> The dark basement is also a place for drama: "There, one plots and plans."<sup>8</sup> The cellar is a symbolic locale for crime and machination: Bigger carries Mary's corpse down into the cellar. Once there, he decides to burn it but has to remove the head because it won't fit inside the furnace. Besides, this place of anguish is associated with Bigger's monstrousness and irrationality which are the consequences of an insurmountable fear.

Until the time when Mary's remains are discovered, Wright chooses the cellar as the setting for the long scene of Bigger's unbearable interrogation by Britten, a private detective, followed by the arrival of several journalists. Why does Wright prefer to locate these scenes in this overcrowded, overheated room into which the house servant even brings a folding table, cups and coffee, rather than in the Daltons' comfortable living-room upstairs?

One reason is that the presence of all those white characters, who suspect nothing before the sacrificial fire, creates suspense: "The fire whispered in the furnace. Bigger knew he would have to clean the ashes out" (248). For the sake of the plot, Wright had to place his characters in the cellar so that they could find the evidence, and thus the truth.

In addition to these narrative constraints, Wright uses this space as a literary figure for Bigger's powerlessness. In the presence of white characters, he seems trapped. On four occasions, the author describes him as standing still against the wall: "Bigger had his back to a wall" (235), "stood against the wall" (237), "still leaned against the wall" (248), "leaned against the wall" (252). He is overwhelmed by the fear known to every black man brought to bay by an accusing white majority. Cornered like the rat in the opening scene of the novel, Bigger knows what is awaiting him: "There was just the old feeling, the feeling that he had had all his life; he was black and had done wrong; white men were looking at something with which they would soon accuse him" (258).

Viewed from the outside, the Daltons' house seems an attractive place protected by a high fence and a heavy locked door. The danger, however, comes not from without but from within its strong walls. Given the fact that the house is a symbol of American social structure, Peggy's naive comment to Bigger about the

---

7. "Mais elle est d'abord l'*être obscur* de la maison, l'*être* qui participe aux puissances souterraines." Bachelard, *ibid.*, p. 35.

8. "On y médite des secrets; on y prépare des projets." Bachelard, *ibid.*, p. 38.

Dalton's home, "Everything's simple and nice here . . . It's just like one big family" (94), represents the white community's perception of multi-ethnic America based upon the illusion that a segregated society can function — as long as everyone knows his or her place.

Interestingly enough, Bigger himself intuitively divides the place into prohibited and non-prohibited zones. On his way to 4605 Drexel Boulevard for his job interview, he wonders which side of the house he should enter: "Would they expect him to come in the front way or back?" (82). Once he has been hired, he remains in the kitchen with Peggy, or withdraws either into his room or down into the cellar. Nonetheless, the strict codification of space which regulates the daily cohabitation of the residents according to their social and racial identities will eventually turn Bigger into a murderer.

In this respect, Wright's treatment of space in relation to his characters corresponds to the narrative technique in which, according to Henri Mitterand, "space is one of the operators through which action is set up."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the articulation of the narrative in *Native Son* is based upon a pattern which binds plot to space. Bigger's tragedy is the consequence of a series of actions in which the characters transgress the spatial limits arbitrarily established by the white community. Trespassing generates chaos because it upsets moral and social conventions, and leads the offenders to disaster and even death, as can be seen in three key scenes.

The first is Bigger's attempt to rob Blum's grocery store. This ill-planned hold-up, which he and his gang view as an act of defiance towards members of the white community who do a thriving business on the South Side, is eventually abandoned; they know that, as black youths, they cannot infringe upon the social rules established by white people. The danger lies not in the committing of a crime in the ghetto, since this is not their first theft, but in the robbing of *a white man's* store:

They had the feeling that the robbing of Blum's would be a violation of ultimate taboo; it would be a trespassing into territory where the full wrath of an alien white world would be turned loose upon them; in short, it would be a symbolic challenge of the white world's rule over them; a challenge which they yearned to make, but were afraid to. (52)

---

<sup>9</sup> "L'espace est un des opérateurs par lesquels s'instaure l'action." Henri Mitterand, *Le discours du roman* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980), p. 201, my translation.

Within the narrative structure of the novel, this passage foreshadows two other climactic transgressions in response to which Bigger also reacts with an irrepressible fear.

The second incident is provoked by Mary and Jan who ask Bigger to take them to a restaurant in the Black Belt. The black youth feels confused when the white couple sits next to him in the front seat of the car: "There were white people to either side of him; he was sitting between two vast looming walls" (107). He then experiences the same feeling of confusion once inside the restaurant where he has to share dinner with them: "She responded to him . . . as if he lived in the same world as she" (105). Mary and Jan's nonconformity and rebellious attitude towards racist social standards disturb Bigger who complies with the rules regulating the hierarchical organization of space. To him, their place is not in the ghetto because they belong to the white world, the world in which they should stay. Bigger views Mary's attempt to discover the inner city and its people as a menacing encroachment upon his territory and responds to it with pent-up fear and mixed feelings of hate and admiration. Throughout, he tries to keep his distance both physically and emotionally: he is reluctant to shake hands with Jan or call him by his first name, and is puzzled by Mary's friendliness and provocative attitudes. Significantly enough, while driving the car, Bigger repeatedly looks at Mary through his rear-view mirror. This oblique glance gives him perspective and protects him from any direct confrontation since he only perceives the reflection of her image. The motif of the mirror functions as a metaphor for the invisible wall that keeps the two communities apart and which Mary awkwardly attempts to scale.

The third scene in which space is an essential component of the plot is Bigger's accidental killing of Mary. Since he is a black man, he is forbidden to enter her bedroom. His presence in such a sexually connoted space would have been interpreted as a transgression of an ultimate taboo by Mary's mother, had she found him there. His fear of being caught in the wrong place triggers a chain of irrationally violent actions. Wright uses Mary's death in her own house as a symbolic warning to the white community which, by preserving its hegemony, damages its own interests and suffers the repercussions of racial segregation.

The close relation between the characters and their environment reflects Wright's naturalistic approach in the treatment of fictional space. In the introduction to his novel, he specified that he "felt and still feel[s] that the environ-

ment supplies the instrumentalities through which the organism expresses itself..."<sup>10</sup> As a ghettoized character, Bigger is caught up in a deterministic web: his personality is shaped by annihilating spatial paradigms and his actions, which he cannot control, are doomed to fail.

Far from being a mere static background, an urban scenery, the segregated city of Chicago evoked in *Native Son* appears as a polysemic key element in the narration. Through his treatment of spatiality, in which aesthetics and ideology are closely intertwined, Richard Wright denounces segregation and its alienating effects. The narrative strategies he uses in his representation of space are indeed essential to his protest fiction.



---

<sup>10</sup>. Richard Wright, "Introduction: How 'Bigger' was born," *ibid.*, pp. 18-9.