

Native Son

By [Heath W. Carter](#)

September 3, 2014

In our "Books Change" series, historians of religion consider books that have changed us or have themselves been changed.

In the last six weeks police officers have killed at least five unarmed African American men: [Eric Garner](#), [John Crawford](#), [Ezell Ford](#), [Dante Parker](#), and [Michael Brown](#). This does not include [Kajieme Powell](#), who was carrying a steak knife when two officers gunned him down just a few miles away from the site of Brown's death. As much as some commentators might want to dismiss the protests as the cynical work of "[screamers](#)" and "[race hustlers](#)," there is no doubt that the unrest sprung in large part from a righteous indignation at this nation's long and persistent record of state violence against black men.

Lauryn Hill plumbs these depths in her newly released single, "[Black Rage.](#)" Sung to the eerie melody of *The Sound of Music*'s "My Favorite Things," the song begins:

"BLACK RAGE is founded on two-thirds a person

Rapings and beatings and suffering that worsens,

Black human packages tied up in strings,

BLACK RAGE can come from all these kinds of things."

Take a moment and listen to it in its entirety: verse after devastating verse, interwoven with a blistering parody on Rodgers and Hammerstein's original refrain. If you do, you will quickly see why Hill, having performed "Black Rage" as early as 2012, [released this "sketch" of it](#) amidst the upheaval in Ferguson. Too many of the lyrics seemed all too prescient as [images of policemen pointing assault rifles at unarmed protestors](#) emerged from that small Missouri town:

Every time I hear "Black Rage" it calls to mind another brilliant meditation on these themes: Richard Wright's 1940 novel, *Native Son*. When I first read the book in my

early twenties, I could not put it down. Growing up, I had never met anyone like Bigger Thomas, the brooding, violent African American man whose story fills these pages. The absence of any such encounter was no accident. While a color-blind mythos permeated the white evangelical Southern California milieu of my youth, that world was in fact designed to keep contemporary Biggers out. It was little wonder that I left for college convinced, as only a young white male can be, that American society was an even playing field. By the time I picked up *Native Son*, the shape of life in first Washington, D.C., and then Chicago had disabused me of my faith in the meritocracy. But the book was nevertheless a revelation.

One scene that I keep coming back to unfolds early in Part I, which is aptly titled, "Fear." Bigger and his friend Gus are traipsing through Chicago on a sunny day. Their eyes are drawn to the sky, where a small plane flying overhead becomes the latest reminder of barred opportunities. The two go on, at Bigger's suggestion, to "play 'white,'" assuming the personas of everyone from J.P. Morgan to FDR. Initially the game induces waves of laughter, but after a while a dark cloud settles over Bigger:

"A street car rattled by. Bigger sighed and swore.

'Goddammit!'

'What's the matter?'

'They don't let us do *nothing*.'

'Who?'

'The *white* folks.'

'You talk like you just now finding that out,' Gus said."

Bigger's mood only worsens. On the heels of a quiet moment, he asks,

"'You know where the white folks live?'

'Yeah,' Gus said, pointing eastward. 'Over across the 'line': over there on Cottage Grove Avenue.'

'Naw; they don't,' Bigger said.

‘What you mean?’ Gus asked, puzzled. ‘Then, where do they live?’

Bigger doubled his fist and struck his solar plexus.

‘Right here down in my stomach,’ he said.

Gus looked at Bigger searchingly, then away, as though ashamed.

‘Yeah, I know what you mean,’ he whispered.

‘Every time I think of ‘em, I *feel* ‘em,’ Bigger said.

‘Yeah; and in your chest and throat, too,’ Gus said.

‘It’s like fire.’

‘And sometimes you can’t hardly breathe . . . ’

Bigger’s eyes were wide and placid, gazing into space.

‘That’s when I feel like something awful’s going to happen to me . . . ’

This dialogue hails from a past that we wish was distant: the other side of World War II, before the Civil Rights gains of the 1960s and the first black president. Yet on this side of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, how many African Americans will grow up with a fire in their throats and a gnawing worry that, at some point, something awful might happen to them?

Hill puts its best: “BLACK RAGE can come from all these kinds of things.”

Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by [Edward J. Blum](#) and [Kate Bowler](#).