WE REAL COOL
BY GWENDOLYN BROOKS
The Pool Players
Seven at the Golden Shovel

WE REAL COOL. WE LEFT SCHOOL. WE LURK LATE. WE STRIKE STRAIGHT. WE SING SIN. WE THIN GIN. WE JAZZ JUNE. WE DIE SOON.
The premiere of Pipeline is Dominique Morisseau’s debut at Lincoln Center Theater. Morisseau—whose prize-winning trilogy The Detroit Project has drawn comparisons to August Wilson’s work—is known for her vivid portraits of working-class people wresting with life. Her characters leap off the stage with passion, verve, and, above all, truth. “I can’t write a story until I know what my characters are willing to fight or die for,” Morisseau told the New York Times. The family in Pipeline is grappling with how to raise a young black boy—how to give him the tools for success and keep him safe. As the family drama unfolds, Morisseau unpacks big ideas about love, family, education, and belonging—this is the territory we’ve delved into in this issue of the Lincoln Center Theater Review.

Dominique Morisseau and the Pulitzer Prize–winning playwright Lynn Nottage spoke to us about their experiences with education and about their emergence as playwrights. Emmanuel Felton’s powerful essay explores the complexity of school choice and the impact it has on a child and on a community. The poet and playwright Cornelius Eady ruminates on the significance of Gwendolyn Brooks and her seminal poem “We Real Cool,” which graces our cover. We have twin essays from the biographer and literary critic Arnold Rampersad and his son Luke on the reverberations of Richard Wright’s novel Native Son in their own lives. Jeffery Renard Allen meditates on his son and on how to raise a black boy today. Fabayo Macintosh-Gordon, the inspiring principal of Brighter Choice Community School, a Bedford-Stuyvesant public school, spoke with us about the importance of community and of investing in our local schools. We also have a visual meditation on fatherhood from the photographer Zun Lee. This edition of the Review features the work of a great many amazing visual artists (Kerry James Marshall, Barkley Hendricks, Carrie Mae Weems, and Kris Graves), for which I must thank Tamar Cohen, our supremely talented art director, who has given our magazine elegance and beauty for twenty-four years. This is her final issue; she is passing on the baton. So in many ways this is a special issue, one filled with articles that compel, explore, and inspire just as Dominique Morisseau’s play holds up a mirror so that we can glimpse the heart of a family as it looks to the future. —Alexis Gargagliano

PIPETLINE

Daily Resurrections:
An Interview with Dominique Morisseau and Lynn Nottage

A Brighter Choice
by Emmanuel Felton

Gwendolyn Was Here
by Cornelius Eady

Father Figure
by Zun Lee

My Father and I Read Native Son
by Luke Rampersad

My Son and I Read Native Son
by Arnold Rampersad

So That Will Be
by Jeffery Renard Allen

We Lift as We Climb:
An Interview with Fabayo McIntosh-Gordon

A pipeline is a channel that conveys something from one place to another. In the education world, the pipeline has evolved into a much discussed, multifaceted metaphor. There are all sorts of pipelines funneling students in and out of schools: The educational pipeline moves students from kindergarten through college; accelerated classrooms serve as pipelines to the highest-achieving middle schools and high schools; and there are pipelines for “gifted” kids to move from “underperforming” public schools to competitive private and public schools. But, for the children who remain, there is often a different kind of pipeline—the school-to-prison pipeline, which funnels children out of public schools and into the criminal-justice system. Many of these children have learning disabilities or a history of poverty, abuse, or neglect. What is the effect of these pipelines? How do children fare? What environment serves students best? How do we address the grievous inequities that necessitate moving children out of neighborhood schools? Questions about these pipelines are debated across the country, not just by educators but by families thinking about which school to send their children to and by public servants debating how to best improve education in their communities and in our country. Dominique Morisseau’s new play asks these questions with deep humanity.
The premiere of Pipeline is Dominique Morisseau’s debut at Lincoln Center Theater. Morisseau—whose prize-winning trilogy The Detroit Project has drawn comparisons to August Wilson’s work—is known for her vivid portraits of working-class people wrestling with life. Her characters leap off the stage with passion, verve, and, above all, truth, “I can’t write a story until I know what my characters are willing to fight or die for,” Morisseau told the New York Times. The family in Pipeline is grappling with how to raise a young black boy—how to give him the tools for success and keep him safe. As the family drama unfolds, Morisseau unpacks big ideas about love, family, education, and belonging—this is the territory we’ve delved into in this issue of the Lincoln Center Theater Review. Dominique Morisseau and the Pulitzer Prize–winning playwright Lynn Nottage spoke to us about their experiences with education and about their emergence as playwrights. 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DAILY RESURRECTIONS: AN INTERVIEW WITH DOMINIQUE MORISSEAU AND LYNN NOTTAGE

Dominique Morisseau: I came to writing plays from being an actress. When I was at the University of Michigan I studied acting, but we weren’t studying any writers of color or women, and on our stages we saw very few plays by writers of color or women. Honestly, I got frustrated with not seeing representations of myself and I wanted to perform in some work. There were two other black women in the department at the time, so I wrote a play. I was a poet, so I was inspired by Ntozake Shange’s having translated poetry into playwriting, and that was my way in. I wrote a choreopoem for myself and the other two black women in the department. It took on a life of its own, and the rest of the student body got behind it. That became a calling card for me. Here was something that was bigger than just my need to perform. There was a voice that people were hungry to hear, and that changed something for me.

Lynn Nottage: I was never really an actress, but I’ve always been a theater lover. Lynn, you grew up in Brooklyn. What was your school like?

DM: Absolutely. That’s the opposite experience of Olivia and the boy in the play, who is sent to a black city. It used to be an all-white city. It’s a real interesting dynamic. I can just imagine, when we would go to places with students from other schools, how much tension there was between us and them. It can really create an inferiority-superiority complex.

LN: My son is eight years old, and when I was looking at school programs for him I thought any school that had the gifted-and-talented program had already failed, because it means that they’re segregating some of the kids, and that the other classrooms aren’t doing what they’re supposed to be doing. I’m all for the universal classroom. We have to figure out how to teach to every child’s gift, rather than to every child’s deficits. Schools succeed when they do that.

AG: Lynn, you grew up in Brooklyn. What was your school like?

LN: We had very different school experiences. When I was young, I went to St. Ann’s—St. Ann’s Episcopal Parochial School, which later became a very famous liberal private school with a principal who didn’t believe at all in any parental engagement but really offered a free rein for education. Then my parents hit hard times, and I had to switch to public school; I went to the High School of Music and Art up in Harlem, which I loved. I had a very rich and much more diverse experience than I did at St. Ann’s.

AG: Is that the school you attended?

LN: No. I went to a public school in Detroit, but it was a school that you had to test into. It was called Bates Academy, the School for the Gifted and Talented, so you can just imagine, when we were kids. There were incidents at my mother’s school, where a teacher had to hide in a room after school from young parents who would come up to the school furious because of the volatile environment of having to carry all of these things on your back, and then also feeling like your child is failing, and that the system is failing your child, and you really don’t know where to put the blame.

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DM: Absolutely, there are a bunch of qualities that, when my mother sees the play, she’s going to be, like, “That’s not me.” (Laughter) “I would never smoke in the classroom.” (Laughter) But the part of Nya that is a master teacher, which is what I call her in the play, is definitely inspired by my mother and the world I knew as a teacher.

AG: Were there similarities between your mother’s school and the one in Pipeline?

DM: Absolutely, my mother taught in Highland Park, Michigan, which is one of the most economically depressed cities in the country. It is a city inside Detroit, so it’s not even a suburb; it’s, like, surrounded by Detroit on all sides. Highland Park is an all-black city. It used to be an all-white city. It has the most neglected care of any city I’ve ever been to. The state of Michigan literally turned off the lights of Highland Park.

LN: That’s the opposite experience of Olivia and the boy in the play, who is sent to a black city. It used to be an all-white city. It’s a real interesting dynamic. I can just imagine, when we would go to places with students from other schools, how much tension there was between us and them. It can really create an inferiority-superiority complex.

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Dominique Morisseau, the award-winning playwright of The Detroit Project, a three-play cycle that includes Detroit ’67, Paradise Blue and Skeleton Crew, is also an actor and the executive story editor on the Showtime series Shameless. This spring she spoke with Lynn Nottage, the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright of Sweat and Ruined, about her newest play, Pipeline: the influence of mothers, education, playwriting, and class in America.

Alexis Gargagliano: How did each of you come to begin writing plays?

Dominique Morisseau: I came to writing plays from being an actor. When I was at the University of Michigan I studied acting, but we weren’t studying any writers of color or women, and on our stages we saw very few plays by writers of color or women. Honestly, I got frustrated with not seeing representations of myself and I wanted to perform in some work. There were two other black women in the department at the time, so I wrote a play. I was a poet, so I was inspired by Ntozake Shange’s having translated poetry into playwriting, and that was my way in. I wrote a choral poem for myself and the other two black women in the department. It took on a life of its own, and the rest of the student body got behind it. That became a calling card for me. Here was something that was bigger than just my need to perform. There was a voice that people were hungry to hear, and that changed something for me.

Lynn Nottage: I was never really an actress, but I’ve always been a theater lover. I was always writing plays. It began in my parents’ living room, with my brother and me crafting these little dramas to entertain ourselves, and also to entertain my parents. Every year those dramas became more expansive and more intricate. I’ve also been drawn to dialogue, to crafting characters and throwing them up in front of an audience.

AG: I read that you thought you were going to go to medical school.

LN: Well, I never thought I was going to go to medical school. I think everyone else, though, my mother did, the university did, but in the back of my mind I always knew there was a part of me that was much more creative. It just took a little while for me to reconcile both sides of my brain—the side that was really very curious and interested in the natural world and then the other side, which was also very curious and interested in the cultural and the social world.

DM: When I was a kid, I told my mother I was going to be a writer, a child psychologist, and an actor. (Laughter)

AG: How did you start dancing and acting?

DM: My aunt in Detroit had a dance company called Detroit City Dance Company, so I grew up dancing. She’d been dancing in New York, and she started her company in the seventies. She’s also a visual artist, and so are her children. I was in her fold. My mother is a teacher, and she’s always been a huge appreciator of literature and the performing arts, so she got me into dance with my aunt, but she also used to read a lot of poetry, and a lot of short stories.

I was fascinated by how great a reader my mother was. After I graduated from college, I worked in the school that she taught in. Sometimes I was the drama teacher, sometimes I was the substitute, sometimes I’d help out what we called the regular teachers. Occasionally, I would go in my mother’s classroom and help her out. I remember sitting in there one time, watching her read a story to her class of third graders. I remember being so inspired by the woman—the way she brought home books written by African-American women, that I was not encountering in the classroom where I went to school, books that were very difficult to find in bookstores. She was an educator on two fronts. She was educating in the classroom, but she was also coming home at night and trying to educate—re-educate—me.

AG: Dominique, did your mother influence Nya, the main character in Pipeline?

DM: Absolutely. Now, there are a bunch of qualities that, when my mother sees the play, she’s going to be, like, “That’s not me.” (Laughter) “I would never smoke in the classroom.” (Laughter) But the part of Nya that is a master teacher, which is what I call her in the play, is definitely inspired by my mother and the world I knew as a teacher.

AG: Were there similarities between your mother’s school and the one in Pipeline?

DM: Absolutely. My mother taught in Highland Park, Michigan, which is one of the most economically devastated cities in our nation. It is a city inside Detroit, so it’s not even a suburb; it’s, like, surrounded by Detroit on all sides. Highland Park is an all-black city. It used to be an all-white city. It has the most neglected care of any city I’ve ever been to. The state of Michigan literally turned off the lights of Highland Park.

I was driving home through Highland Park a few years ago and I turned down a block, and the road came up like a volcano in the middle of the street. I was angry at a state that would turn its back on a city like that. The country was bailing out companies, but it wouldn’t take care of a city where children are playing in the streets.

There were incidents at my mother’s school, where a teacher had to hide in a class and not let the students out so they would come up to the school furious because of the volatile environment of having to carry all of these things on your back, and you not feeling like your child is failing, and that the system is failing your child, and you really don’t know where to put the blame.

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DM: No. I went to a public school in Detroit, but it was a school that you had to test into. It was called Bates Academy, the School for the Gifted and Talented, so you can just imagine, when we would go to places with students from other schools, how much tension there was between us and them. It can really create an inferiority-superiority complex.

LN: My son is eight years old, and when I was looking at school programs for him I thought any school that had the gifted-and-talented program had already failed, because it means that they’re segregating some of the kids, and that the other classrooms aren’t doing what they’re supposed to be doing. I’m all for the universal classroom. We have to figure out how to teach to every child’s gift, rather than to every child’s deficits. Schools succeed when they do that.

AG: Lynn, you grew up in Brooklyn. What was your school like?

LN: I had two very different school experiences. When I was young, I went to St. Ann’s—St. Ann’s Episcopal Parochial School, which later became a very famous liberal private school with a principal who didn’t believe all at any parental engagement but really believed in a free and open education. Then my parents hit hard times, and I had to switch to public school; I went to the High School of Music and Art in Harlem, which I loved. I had a very rich and much more diverse experience there than I did at St. Ann’s.

AG: Tell us about your most distinctive experience of Omari, the boy in the play, who is sent to a fancy private, predominantly white school.

LN: It is a really interesting dynamic. I
grew up in what would be called a “very tough” neighborhood, primarily African-American and Latin, and then I got on the bus every day and went to St. Ann’s—a elite private school, in which I felt very much like an outsider. I felt very self-conscious about where I lived and how I dressed, and having to make that adjustment was really tough. I think about the anxiety of assimilation that a child has to carry on top of just trying to read and write and learn the basics. The child has to shed pieces of herself in order to fit into an environment that isn’t necessarily indigenous to who she is.

DM: That’s so interesting. Because my school was in the city of Detroit, it was predominantly African-American, and it was on the east side, which was considered a tougher part of the city. I never thought of it as a privilege, but I lived on the west side of Detroit, so I was being bused over to a school that had this special sitting around it, and the special education. I had amazing teachers. In eighth grade we were SAT-ready with our vocabulary. My high-school teachers didn’t know some of the words I had learned in middle-school.

When I came back home to my neighborhood and played with my neighborhood friends, who all went to the neighborhood schools and were older than me, too, I was the failout pupil. I was a special one, I was a very smart one, I was a very good learner. I didn’t have any proper coats, and she would put me in service to them. I thought that was a smart thing to do—I never took for granted what I had, and I learned that my role for these students was to be in service to them, like she’s been. That helped me name the privilege of my education.

AG: How did these experiences gird you for how tough the playwriting world is, and how are you less than welcoming it can be to women of color?

LN: Well, our plays are the sum total of who we are, and I think that every person we encounter, every space we move through becomes part of what we put down on the page. I think that my experience of growing up in Brooklyn and growing up there—this cultural neighborhood is sort of the foundation of who I am as a writer. Just in terms of girding yourself, Dominique and I are different ages, and I think that she’s somewhat fortunate to come of age at a time when the theater world is much more open and welcoming to the voices of black women.

DM: Yes.

LN: When I first started out, I was looking up in a completely barren landscape. There were very, very few African-American women who were invited to do plays on even the second stages of the theaters in New York City, and even fewer African-American women making plays in the regional theaters. I think, with the exception of Pearl Cleage and, occasionally, Suzan-Lori Parks, there was no one out there. I think that growing up in a neighborhood that was tough, having to carry on top of myself every time I got off the subway or the bus, to walk through that neighborhood, and perhaps be punched in the chest and confront someone, I think it gave me a level of toughness that I appreciate, because I’m not afraid.

I’m someone who can get knocked down and get back up. I’m someone who will confront a bully. When I was in high school, I was being given Cs on papers because of who I was. I knew that as a writer I was an A-plus, and I confronted the teacher and said that. I think all of those are the tools that I came armed with when I was trying to pene-

In this business, tools that I think I still have in my arsenal.

DM: I came up as an actor not studying the Lynn Nottage or the Suzan-Lori Parks, and so my education taught me to find them for myself. I would learn about their work, or learn about Pearl Cleage, or learn about Aishah Rahaman, or Cheryl West, but I was actively seeking out work and had to find it for myself. That taught me to write the ticket that isn’t there, to write the roles that I’m not. To see my schools—to make it happen myself.

Even though Lynn and I belong to two different generations, we’re all being snared into this same moment of black women’s voices being heard in theater. I would like it to be not a moment but a lifetime.

DM: Right, instead of a cool theme for the time that we’re in.

LN: I do think there is something about that toughness and that resilience—I had a bunch of black women educators in my life, who were always amoring me for a less-than-pleasing industry. However, I also think that’s something that could prepare me for its being so tough, or that we should be looking for balance in critics and in the press, and in what’s happening behind the scenes in theater.

I have to double down, re-arm myself for the next phase, every time, because even when it seems like we’ve shattered one ceiling, another one is being built. I think of all the kind of muscles those are, but (Laughter)... AG: You have them.

DM: That’s right.

LN: In my family we’re having the op-
opposite educational experiences. My mixed-race son is going to a predominantly black school.

DM: Going to a predominantly Latino school was much easier for me, just for the level of comfort. You walk in and you look like everyone else, and you can sort of blend in, and say that he probably will not have any problems.

DM: I agree. On my half days, my mother would take me to the school where she taught and put me to work. Until I aged out of the grade that she taught, I would have to take the tests her students took while I was there, I’d have to tutor some of the students, I’d have to help her in the class. My mother would go in my closet and get clothes for the kids she felt didn’t have proper coats, and she would put me in service to them. I thought that was a smart thing to do—I never took for granted what I had, and I learned that my role for these students was to be in service to them, like she’s been. That helped me name the privilege of my education.

AG: What made these kids mad? What made these kids yell at them and say to them when they made me mad. What made these kids lie? They were terrible. I hated them.

LN: I came home in a uniform every day, and my mother would take me to the school where she taught and put me to work. Until I aged out of the grade that she taught, I would have to take the tests her students took while I was there, I’d have to tutor some of the students, I’d have to help her in the class. My mother would go in my closet and get clothes for the kids she felt didn’t have proper coats, and she would put me in service to them. I thought that was a smart thing to do—I never took for granted what I had, and I learned that my role for these students was to be in service to them, like she’s been. That helped me name the privilege of my education.

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DM: That’s right.

LN: You talk about resilience. The muscles that I think are necessary to persevere in this business are the ones that allow you to have these daily resurrections.

DM: Yeah.

LN: If you’ve been knocked down and you look at this landscape that remains chal- lenging and littered with all these obsta-
cles, it’s, how every morning you get up and you find the courage to face that new day, and to sit down and write, and then, once you finish that play, to send it out and to feel confident that it’s going to be received in the way that you want it to be received.

AG: Sweet and Pipeline both take on class in interesting and very different ways. Were you thinking about class specifically when you started these plays?

LN: When I sat down to write, I wasn’t specifically thinking about class, but I was thinking about working people and people I know and how we give them a voice. Be-

cause as a theater artist I consider myself to be a working person. I understand the struggles of the people I write about in my play, because we live on the edge of economic insecurity every single day. We understand what it is to wake up in the morning and not know where that next meal is going to come from, where that next job is going to come from.

I think that when I sat down to write about people who’ve been locked out of their factory I was really exploring issues that I deal with on a day-to-day basis, which is like the fear of the unknown. Be-

cause after every successful play you really don’t know whether you’re going to have another one. You don’t know whether the wind is going to change and suddenly the way in which you write and what you’re writing about isn’t going to be of interest to the theaters. I understand that fear, and I understand the fear that’s permeating the country right now—a fear that can turn very dangerous and toxic.

DM: A lot of times when we talk about when we got the president that we got, we talk about how we failed the working class. But a lot of times we talk about as if we failed the white working class, because those are the people that we think voted for Trump in D.C. We’ve failed the white working class, so now it’s time to listen to the white working class. It just feels like here we go again. We’re running around try-

AG: I come from a family of teachers and factory workers and hairdressers. I don’t have to try to write about the working class. I’m just writing about the people I know, and the people I grew up with, and the people I worked with, because I was a teacher and an educator, and I know the world
grew up in what would be called a “very tough” neighborhood, primarily African-American and Latino, and then I got on the bus every day and went to St. Ann’s — this elite private school, in which I felt very much like an outsider. I felt very self-conscious about where I lived and how I dressed, and having to make that adjustment was really tough. I think about the anxiety of assimilation that a child has to carry on top of just trying to read and write and learn the basics. The child has to shed pieces of herself in order to fit into an environment that isn’t necessarily indigenous to who she is.

DM: That’s so interesting. Because my school was in the city of Detroit, it was predominantly African-American, and it was on the east side, which was considered a tougher part of the city. I never thought of it as a privilege, but I lived on the west side of Detroit, so I was being bused over to a school that had this special sitting around it, and the special education. I had amazing teachers. In eighth grade we were SAT-ready with our vocabulary. My high-school teachers didn’t know some of the words I had learned in middle school. When I came back home to my neighborhood and played with my neighborhood friends, who all went to the neighborhood schools and were older than me, too, I was the oddball. It was like an education that was over a time to pick on somebody, it would be me. As a kid, I thought they were my friends. Later in life, I was able to identify them as bullies. They were terrible people.

My mother reminds me of things I would yell at them and say to them when I was in high school; I came home in a uniform every day that I was there, I’d have to tutor some of the students, I’d have to help her in the class. My mother would go in my closet and get clothes for the kids she felt didn’t have proper coats, and she would put me in service to them. I thought that was a smart thing to do — I never took for granted what I had, and that I learned that my role for these students was to be in service to them, like she’s been. That helped me name this privilege of my education.

AG: How did these experiences gird you for how tough the playwriting world is, and for how much less than welcoming it can be to write and learn the basics. The child has to carry on top of just trying to read and write and then, to sit down and write, and then, once you finish that play, to send it out and to feel confident that it’s going to be received in the way that you want it to be received.

DM: Right, instead of a cool theme for the time that we’re in.

AG: I think there is something about that toughness and that resilience — I had a bunch of black women educators in my life, who were always amoring me for a less-than-pleasing industry. However, I also think there’s nothing that could prepare me for its being so tough, or that we would still be looking for balance in critics and in the press, and in what’s happening behind the scenes in theater.

AG: Sweet and Pipeline both take on class in interesting and very different ways. Were you thinking about class specifically when you started these plays?

DM: Right when I first started out, I was looking up in Brooklyn and grown-up landscape. There were very few very African-American women who were invited to do plays on even the second stages of the theaters in New York City, and even fewer of them making plays in the regional theaters. I think, with the exception of Pearl Cleage and, occasionally, Suzan-Lori Parks, there was no one out there. I think that growing up in a neighborhood that was tough, having to fortify myself every time I got off the subway or the bus, to walk through that neighborhood, and perhaps be punched in the chest and confront someone, I think it gave me a level of toughness that I appreciate, because I’m not afraid.

AG: You’ve come to the theater world is much more open and welcoming. You call it the theater world. I understand the fear, and I understand the fear that’s permeating the country right now — a fear that can turn very dangerous and toxic.

DM: It works. It would probably unify a working class across cultural and racial backgrounds if we would stop talking like that and stop thinking like that and stop even talking about art that way.

I come from what we call a chocolate country, and that’s a predominantly black city of working-class people. I have, like, three hundred family members in Detroit, and the majority of them are working-class. I come from a family of teachers and factory workers and hairdressers. I don’t have to write about the working class and then there are all the people who took their jobs. That’s not how it works. It would probably unify a working class across cultural and racial backgrounds if we would stop talking like that and stop thinking like that and stop even talking about art that way.

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I was a statistical anomaly, growing up in New Orleans: a black boy from a relatively well-off family in a city with one of the widest racial wealth gaps in the country. My childhood included yearly trips abroad and private schools, for which my parents paid full freight. These facts often put me in awkward situations. One day, my immature freshman self found myself on campus late without a ride home. I fiddled with my cell phone until a classmate, a white guy who was on the track team along with most of the other black guys in my grade, came down the main stairs and offered me a lift. I didn’t play sports and I didn’t know each other well, so it was a nice gesture, especially since he lived in the opposite direction, in a suburb called Metairie.

We climbed into his car and took the fifteen-minute drive down Claiborne Avenue, New Orleans’s main east-west drag, and onto the interstate. We talked about music. He showed off his knowledge of rap, which I didn’t particularly like. Then we moved on to the overlapping list of elite colleges most of our classmates were applying to. (He would end up at Dartmouth; I went to Emory.) As we got off I-10 at Esplanade Avenue, near my home, it dawned on me that he was one of the few classmates who had seen where I lived. As a black kid navigating New Orleans’s overwhelmingly white private schools, I spent most of my adolescence in their neighborhoods and at their homes. I lived in a large nineteenth-century house on a tree-lined street just off Esplanade Avenue. Yet ten blocks from where I lived more modest, shotgun houses dominated. It was a good neighborhood, but one that white people avoided. As my classmate dropped me off, he remarked—seemingly surprised—how nice the houses were and complimented mine. This made me feel both proud and irritated: he knew so little about my neighbor- hood. I went to bed that night feeling self-righteous about how much more I knew about New Orleans and its people, in- contrast to my own blind spots.

Really, there was a lot about New Orleans, and my own neighborhood, that I knew very little of. I grew up between the neighborhood in which I lived and the one where I spent all my time, without having a solid footing in either. I live in New York now, but, as part of my job as an education reporter, I often return home—to a city where I don’t quite feel at home I can appreciate Tremé’s history as one of the first black neigh- borhoods in the country, but I don’t have the kind of deep love of its customs, its music, its street culture that my mom and my grandmother share. And while I spent much of my child- hood hanging out Uptown, I no longer feel much of a connection to that neighborhood either. School choice, by its very nature, uproots its customers from their communities, increasing the proportion of Americans who have no stake in what’s going on in public schools, the schools that will always serve the children most in need of attention.

School choice also raises larger questions about why the gov- ernment funds education at all. I grew up in a town in which the philosophical commitment to creating a system of public schools to enhance the public good had largely been abandoned. And what worries me about the school programs championed by the new administration in Washington, especially private-school vouchers, is that this mind-set will spread. These programs give a huge advantage to kids whose parents have the wherewithal to navigate complex systems. Instead of increasing opportunity, vouchers ration it and cement the divide between the haves and the have-nots. They also create unnecessary competition among schools.

Milwaukee is a case in point. In 1990, Milwaukee parents were given a choice that no other families in the country had: they could send their children to private schools free with tax- payer-funded vouchers. It was an idea that originated, in part, in
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Really, there was a lot about New Orleans, and my own neighborhood, that I knew very little of. I grew up across the street from a school that I had never stepped foot in, Joseph S. Clark Senior High School. It was the second public high school established for African-Americans in New Orleans, a Tremé in-stitution that has produced some of the pillars of New Orleans’s African-American community. My family’s roots were there. But by the time I was growing up in the middle class had abandoned Clark. Most public schools served only the students who were unable to escape the system, which, in New Orleans, means poor black kids. Study after study has concluded that segregat-ed schools concentrate and amplify the myriad issues that come pervious to my own blind spots.

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Milwaukee’s school-choice program exemplifies what President Trump and his education secretary, Betsy DeVos, are trying to replicate nationwide. Last year, as Trump made repeated visits to Milwaukee’s suburbs, he promised to bring order and prosper- ity to cities like Milwaukee. In his speech, he rallied against the city’s public schools, pointing out that “55 public schools in this city have been rated as failing” and “there is only a 60 percent graduation rate, and it’s one of the worst public system schools in the country.” He went on to blame the city’s Democratic lead- ership for this abysmal performance, failing to mention that the poor ratings and graduation results are the outcome of nearly three decades in which the city has embraced its central ed- ucation-reform platform: vouchers. Indeed, Milwaukee’s kids perform no better than their peers in similarly long-struggling districts where families have far less choice.

Inside the city limits, residents are now trying to deal with a long list of woes that people there say competition has only exacerbated and would only benefit the students opting for private schools but the competition from private schools would also force the city’s long-struggling pub- lic schools to improve. The program never managed to achieve its political object. The program focuses on eight problems, in- cluding the number of city children who are up to date on their vaccinations, the number of high-quality preschool programs being offered in the city, how many Milwaukee students pass third-grade math and reading tests, and how many complete high school, go on to college, and eventually get a degree. The goal is to find pockets of success, where students are making progress on each issue, and replicate these strategies in other schools. Tom Barrett, the city’s longtime mayor, called Milwau- kee Succeeds “the most serious effort that I’ve seen in decades to bring all the different factions of the community together.”

One place where working together seems to be working is in the window.

When the Wisconsin legislature started the Milwaukee voucher program, lawmakers included money for an exper- imental study to compare results for low-income students in the private schools with those who were still in public schools. Despite finding no significant difference between the two sys- tems, they decided to continue the voucher program but to stop funding the research. After three decades of competition, Milwaukee schools—public district, voucher, and charter col- lectively—perform about as well as similar high-poverty vouch- er-free urban districts like those in Detroit, Memphis, and Buffalo. In fact, many voucher supporters around the country have stopped arguing that private schools will improve outcomes and, instead, contend that being able to choose a private school is akin to a fundamental right.

Milwaukee’s leaders now think that collaboration, not com- petition, will be the only way to improve the city’s diverse net- work of district, charter, and voucher schools. Three years ago, they founded an initiative called Milwaukee Succeeds, whose object is to bring together leaders from across the city’s vari- ous school “sectors.” The program focuses on eight problems, in- cluding the number of city children who are up to date on their vaccinations, the number of high-quality preschool programs being offered in the city, how many Milwaukee students pass third-grade math and reading tests, and how many complete high school, go on to college, and eventually get a degree. The goal is to find pockets of success, where students are making progress on each issue, and replicate these strategies in other schools. Tom Barrett, the city’s longtime mayor, called Milwaukee’s Succeeds “the most serious effort that I’ve seen in decades to bring all the different factions of the community together.”

One place where working together seems to be working is at Jackson Elementary School, whose principal, Annette Burks, has tried to make it an oasis. She’s painted the walls warm earth tones and is herself a calming presence; on the day that I visited, she was comforting a child who had been crying. She’s also one of the few people in Milwaukee with a genuine belief that the vision of vouchers she championed, closed its doors last year after con- verting from a traditional private school to one heavily depend- ent on vouchers, and, finally, to a charter school, without ever finding a way to make the numbers work.

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The nation’s oldest voucher program now allows nearly twenty-eight thousand students to attend private, mostly reli- gious schools, while another seventy-six thousand children twenty-eight thousand students to attend private, mostly re- ligious schools to improve. The program never managed to achieve this goal.

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One place where working together seems to be working is Gwen T. Jackson Early Childhood and Elementary School. Jack- son is situated in the 53206 ZIP code, an area long synonymous with Milwaukee’s biggest problems: Two-thirds of the children there live in poverty. According to a 2012 study despite all the choices theoretically available to them, one hundred percent of black students in the area attend hyper-segregated schools, where they make up at least ninety percent of the student body. Kanuka Bucks, the principal at Jackson, has tried to make it an oasis. She’s painted the walls warm earth tones and is herself a black child; her connection to privilege can still feel too tenuous to risk.

Emmanuel writes long-form pieces about the intersection of race and profit newsroom that covers inequality and innovation in education.

town. “Before, we had more tantrums,” she says. “Teachers were very confrontational, saying, ‘I don’t know what to do.’ Now we say, ‘Okay, let’s stop, take a breath, and collaborate.’ ”

But while Burks’s school and Milwaukee still have a very long way to go in providing their students, particularly poor black and brown kids, with a high-quality education, I left the city feeling inspired that a community as large and as diverse as Milwaukee is trying to band together and look out for what’s best for all children. Still, when it comes to our own children the urge to ignore the public interest—and the research—is strong. Americans elected a president who seems to value, above all else, competition and winning. It will require more than a few local efforts like the one in Milwaukee to make the American school system more inclusive and fair, it will require a more larger cultural shift and an about-face from government at all levels.

But I recognize that it’s hard to code advantages—a difficulty that plays a role in the argument for vouchers. It’s a dynamic that I see at work in my own family. Not long before my trip to Milwaukee, I flew to Los Angeles for my niece’s first birthday. It was a bayou-themed affair at a play space that my half brother and my sister-in-law had rented out on Ventura Boulevard in Studio City. A few nights before the party, the three of us talked about schools over Thai food. As my brother and his wife went down their list of options for my niece, a pattern quickly emerged. They were only considering private schools where she would be surrounded by rich white kids. As an education report- er with access to the latest research, I knew that no matter what school my niece attends she’ll likely excel, given her parents’ re- sources. But I didn’t even think of suggesting that they look into their local public school. I want the very best that money can buy for this child, whose future I’m already dreaming about and worrying over. And yet my relatives—middle-class, well-con- nected parents—would be assets to their local public school.

When making these kinds of decisions, families around the country often opt for individual gain in a way that collectively endorses the same kind of zero-sum thinking that drives the voucher movement. It’s a dynamic that plays a role in the argument for vouchers. It’s a dynamic that plays a role in the argument for vouchers.

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According to Milwaukee Succeeds data, the reading program boosted scores, and teachers using Growing Minds reported that students are better able to regulate their emotions. Burks is ex- cited by the prospect that the work on social-emotional issues tested at Jackson will be adopted by other schools in her home-
Black boys and their bravado. Black men and their short life spans. The spell of black codes and slang, and the worlds they wall through...The black male body, seen through the gaze of a wise African-American mother in the late 1950's, who will change the accent on the pronoun "we" in this poem, "We Real Cool," when she reads it aloud from soft to hard as the conditions and consciousness of both white and black America change over the years. If a poem at its best holds the ability to capture an otherwise slack, everyday moment and allow you to see what you know, what we all know, but until then failed to find a way to put into words, then this short poem by Gwendolyn Brooks is surely a glorious, if painful, American masterpiece.

Or perhaps another way to think of the brilliance of this poem is to consider the gaze of this poet (and a real gaze sparked by this poem, Gwendolyn Brooks passing by a pool hall and wondering), her translation of a blasted, "bad" neighborhood in a part of a world—black Chicago—that isn't supposed to be on any poetry map, and the subjects, seven young black men, who aren't supposed to be heard in any decent American poem. And what do they tell us? She watches their bodies—tight, powerful, coiled—after the knowledge has sunk into their muscles, their bones, their brain stems, in the days after they've "graduated" from an education system that spat them out, when they're looked around and under-stood that this is all there is for them, this is all they'll be. She doesn't describe their bodies in the poem, but she doesn't have to. She doesn't tell you the age range of the boys, but she doesn't have to. They Left. They Lurk. They Don't Have to. They Die. They Tell you the age range of the boys, but she doesn't have to. She doesn't have to. They Left. They Lurk. They Don't Have to. They Die.

The emotionally rich and visually gorgeous large-scale paintings of Barkley L. Hendricks (1945-2017) altered the landscape of contemporary American painting. His subjects were often blacks of the 1960s and 1970s, and his intoxicatingly lush portraits of these men and women captured the Zeitgeist of the second half of the twentieth century.
When I start writing a poem, I don’t think about models or about what anybody else in the world has done. —Gwendolyn Brooks

Black boys and their bravado. Black men and their short life spans. The spell of black codes and slang, and the worlds they walk through. The black male body, seen through the gaze of a wise African-American mother in the late 1950s, who will change the accent on the pronoun “we” in this poem, “We Real Cool,” when she reads it aloud from soft to hard as the conditions and consciousness of both white and black America change over the years. If a poem at its best holds the ability to capture an otherwise slack, everyday moment and allow you to see what you know, what we all know, but until then failed to find a way to put into words, then this short poem by Gwendolyn Brooks is surely a glorious, if painful, American masterpiece.

Or perhaps another way to think of the brilliance of this poem is to consider the gaze of this poet (and a real gaze sparked by this poem, Gwendolyn Brooks passing by a pool hall and wondering), her translation of a blasted, “bad” neighborhood in a part of a world—black Chicago—that isn’t supposed to be on any poetry map, and the subjects, seven young black men, who aren’t supposed to be here in any decent American poem. And what do they tell us? She watches their bodies—tight, poweful, coiled—after the knowledge has sunk into their muscles, their bones, their brain stems, in the days after they’re “graduated” from an education system that spat them out, when they’re looked around and understood that this is all there is for them, this is all they’ll be. She doesn’t describe their bodies in the poem, but she doesn’t have to. She doesn’t tell you the age range of the boys, but she doesn’t have to. They Left. They Lurk. They Die. This is the “cool” that haunts and haunts every syllable they “speak.”

What does it look like to lose? In “We Real Cool,” it looks like you’re having all the fun in the world, but they know, and you as a reader know, there’s quicksand beneath the rough joy. Tracking the “we” in “We Real Cool” is like falling off a cliff, no way but down, and no break until the last enjambment.

When Gwendolyn Brooks wrote this poem, which first appeared in 1959, she said, “They are essentially saying, “Kilroy is here. We are.” But Kilroy is graffiti—you see the mark left after the body is long gone, the only proof that anyone was ever there. This poem has the ability to bend time and space—the seven are here, and gone, on fire and spent, alive and buried, the “golden/shovel” has already done its work—all held in suspension and broken down within a black mother’s gaze.

It was a gaze that felt very familiar to me when I first read Brooks’s poem, probably in elementary school, around 1965 or so, in my hometown of Rochester, New York. I was still a few years away from even thinking about writing a poem, but the poem of “We Real Cool” was like sitting on the porch of my parents’ house and listening to my mother and aunts run down the heartbreakers. It’s one of the great tricks of the poem; the “speaker,” the “we,” is both male and female. The boys in the poem were the boys our mothers didn’t want us to become, the fear that mothers pulled out Bibles against, that their tongues tried to spell against with belts and switches. It was a song that sang the dangers of how narrow the margins are: See what happens if you leave school? See what happens if you stay out late? See what happens if you hang with hoodlums? See what happens if you don’t go to church? See what happens if you crawl into a bottle? See what happens if you weld around? Our young bodies didn’t know the traps our mothers knew were lying in wait, how death and ruin could look like a party, how quickly fun could turn into a bullet or a handcuff. One trip on any of those steps was enough; any black mother knew that. Though I didn’t live in Chicago, “We Real Cool” felt like part of the soundtrack of my block.

In 1959, when Gwendolyn Brooks wrote “We Real Cool,” she said that when reading the poem aloud the “we’s” are meant to be said softly, as though the protagonists in the poem are questioning the validity of their existence.” But by 1966, the civil-rights movement in full stride and the Black Arts movement pushing its way into view, her poem had shifted from the fear of not hitting the goal of middle-or working-class respectability and more toward self-determination and definition. She had agreed to have the poem re-published as a broadside by an African-American publisher—an intentional statement from the first African-American to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry. The font of the broadside made the lines of the poems appear as if they were slashed across a black wall with white chalk, a gesture as loud as folkly Bob Dylan putting on dark glasses and plugging in a Telecaster. And by the time I finally got to meet this great soul, in the mid-1980s, on a stage with some other up-and-coming poets, this woman who helped prove to me that the lives around me held truth and poetic worth, by then the “we” in “We Real Cool” was anything but questioning. She snapped the word in the air like a firecracker, like a boxer planting his feet in the teeth of a gale and daring the wind to move him. Like a man who starts back at your gaze and doesn’t give a shit what you think.

Poet/playwright/songwriter Cornelius Eady is the author of several poetry collections, including Victims of the Latest Dance Craze, The Gathering of My Name, and Hardhead-ed Weather. He wrote the libretto to Diedre Murray’s opera Running Man and the verse play Brutal Imagination. He is a co-founder of the Cave Canem Foundation and is currently the Miller Family Endowed Chair in Literature and Writing and Professor in English and Theater at the University of Missouri.
Between 2011 and 2015, Zun Lee traveled across America photographing black fathers and their families. The intimate images in the “Father Figure” series show men navigating their daily lives, not just as fathers but also as black men. The love and the trouble and the joy of everyday life are palpable in these photographs.

According to census statistics, more than two-thirds of black children are raised in single-parent households; the vast majority of those households are headed by the mother. This fact feeds the prevailing stereotype of the absentee black father. However, research shows that black fathers are no less present in their kids’ lives than fathers of other ethnic groups, whether they live with their family or not. When it comes to black men, we seem to forget that a man who may not fit conventional ideas of fatherhood (he may not live at home with his kids, he may not be married, he may sometimes struggle financially) can nevertheless be a present, responsible, loving parent. Yet images of black men raising their children are noticeably under-represented in mainstream media coverage. Lee’s work tells another story. The tenderness and vulnerability of the fathers captured in his photographs is all the more powerful for its rarity.


A father using a parking lot to play baseball with his son and daughter. Bronx, New York. June 2012.

Bedtime shenanigans with Carlos Richardson and his daughter Selah. Harlem, NY. August 2012.

Bedtime shenanigans with Carlos Richardson and his daughter Selah. Harlem, NY. August 2012.

Bathroom shenanigans with Carlos Richardson and his daughter Selah. Harlem, NY. August 2012.
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Native Son was never assigned reading for me. Not in Palo Alto, where I graduated from high school with just five other black people, all of whom were men. The first time I read Native Son, it was purely as a story of fiction, not as a cautionary tale for a young black man in America. I grew up in a prosperous, academic household. Nothing like Bigger’s upbringing. But I get Bigger’s anger. It oscillates between an ember glowing and a flame lashing out. I’ve seen it. I recognize that rage in myself and others. When I’ve felt it, it’s scared me, because my instinct tells me that it’s tied to something deep and real within me. At times I’ve found that anger useful. It’s made me feel powerful in situations where I was confused and afraid. When circumstances provoke that deep anger, I’ve learned to trust my instincts and to recognize that I’m dealing with prejudice.

I realize now that my parents raised me to be sensitive to these instincts. I suppose most teenage boys are counseled to walk away from fights, to avoid raucous house parties, and to be sure that no one in their vehicles has any illicit substances in their possession. But there is more at stake for a young black man in a predominantly white suburb. I was six when my mother first warned me about the police. Blue and red lights flickered in our living room window as a police cruiser pulled over a car directly across from our house. The driver was a college-aged black man. Soon there were more cruisers. Officers searched the man’s vehicle while more frisked him. Other cars rolled by, drivers and passengers gawking at the scene. My mother took me into the living room and told me that it was our responsibility to watch over our neighbors and make sure the police treated them fairly. I wasn’t sure what she meant. “The police are the good guys!” I reassured her. “Not always,” she said.

A black kid in Palo Alto has a target on his back. As teenagers, my friends and I weren’t hassled by every cop, but it happened enough that we grew to expect it. Once, I was in the back of an SUV full of white students when we were pulled over. It was night, and our Dudley hadn’t been on. The officers gave us a verbal warning and sent us on our way. Not long afterward, I was in the passenger seat of a car driven by my black friend Chevelier. His mother had a white Cadillac that had recently been repaired. We’d taken it out late at night for a spin and were just down the road from his apartment when we were pulled over. The officers cautiously approached the car from both sides before asking if either of us had weapons or warrants. We were being detained because the rear license-plate light was out. The officers instructed us to exit the vehicle while they ran our information and patted us down. When nothing came up, they became polite and even joked with us about our high-school football team. We posed no threat to the community, so it was back to business as usual. Chevy and me still joke about it. I’ll never forget the experience that we’d mention in passing to friends during lunch breaks at school. We drove the Cadillac home with a local public-radio station murmuring on low to help fill the silence. When I got home, my father greeted me, more relieved than angry, as I’d expected. He gave me a hug, and we went inside for dinner. Chevy and I never really talked about that, and so it was lost on me that, as an adult, I’d be asked to recall this situation, when, in fairness, it should have been classified as a near-miss.

I understand Bigger’s rage as an essential part of what it means to be a black American. The legacy of slavery and neo-slavery is woven into our culture. I didn’t learn about it in school, but I learned it at the same. I learned maddening things about America’s historical treatment of blacks that my white friends never had to learn. All they knew was the history I was taught, that there was a war a century ago in which 600,000 men died, a war that wasn’t about slavery, but rather about states’ rights and a power struggle over the U.S. Constitution. It was a war this generation had to learn about in the same way I learned about the Revolutionary War. In many ways, I was pregnant with rage long before the police, the Ku Klux Klan, or the rest of the Jim Crow system ever had a thought about me. It was an anger that was always present, underlying my sense of self, of who I was. It was a rage that was always there, ready to erupt, ready to provoke me. Because I knew that I was a black American, that I was living in a country that had a history of slavery, of racism, of violence against black people. I knew that the rage was there in many of us, and that it’s going to be expressed one way or another. It’s not usually expressed through violence. Art, which sublimes but also mimics rage at times, can become a prime surrogate for rage.

I was challenged further when I realized that most of my young black American friends saw Bigger as a hero. This was also true of undergraduates I taught as an assistant in the first course on black fiction ever offered at Harvard (taught by Robert O’Meally). Many of my students were white, and death drove that to the forefront of their attention, when, in fairness, I don’t think of it as the defining moment in Bigger’s life, but rather an event that precipitated by racism; I was even more upset by their virtual dismissal of black Bessie’s murder as mere collateral damage. To Bigger, epitomized Wright’s deep pessimism about blacks and also the ideal of black self-love. His autobiography, Black Boy (1945), compounded this sense of pessimism. In two early paragraphs, he listed terrible, essentially reversible, flaws in Negroes. A further revision was expressed in his novel. Here, he declared, he had to try to look beyond all the bitterness in Negroes, to realize their nobility. I began to see it in those moments when Bigger changed his mind, when he was more human, when he was more sensitive to the feelings of others. It was a sense of his own humanity and dignity.

I was not alone in regretting Wright’s novel. The novelist and critic Ralph Ellison, who knew Wright very well, was puzzled by “the enigma” Wright personified. Ellison lamented the fact that Wright could “so dissociate himself from the complexity of his background” even as he sought to lead blacks forward as a people. Ellison regretted the fact, as he saw it, that Wright seemed unable to “depict a Negro as intelligent, as creative or as dedicated as himself.” In a potentially fatal move, Wright had challenged white American citizenship and racism, on the one hand, to black social incompetence and pathology, on the other. No wonder, then, that so many sympathetic commentators of Wright’s work act as if these two paragraphs do not exist. But his words are surely essential to any deep understanding of Bigger and of Native Son.

We have to engage the idea that Bigger epitomizes the pathology that Wright identified (certainly when he wrote Native Son) with black American culture. And yet Bigger is not easily pigeon-holed. Like many landmark literary characters, at some point he takes on a life of his own. As the only enraged black man in the novel, is he victim or victor? So much depends, I think, on what we make of his rage. Does his rage, and his resulting actions, eventually emanate him? Facing execution, he tells his white communist lawyer, Max, “What I killed for, I am!... What I killed for must’ve been good... I didn’t know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for.” These words have an electrifying effect on Max. His eyes are “full of terror.” Bigger, however, is calm: “I know what I’m saying real good... I’ll just all right.”
Mozart

Luke Rampersad is an actor and producer living in Los Angeles. He is a graduate of the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art and has a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Swarthmore College. As an actor, his credits include Mozart in the Jungle, Rosewood, and Salace.

In 1970, on my way to a doctorate in English and American literature at Harvard, I still had never taken a single course that included the work of a black American writer. None of the schools I attended had ever offered one. My education in Trinidad, at a Roman Catholic high school proud of its British standards, had kept me ignorant of American literature as a field of study. This ignorance ended when I arrived in the United States to begin college in 1965. That fall, I fell in love with American literature, especially such writers as Melville, Emerson, and Whitman. Most of them had been inspired by the bitter disputes concerning slavery and black life that had culminated in the Civil War. However, with few exceptions, such as in Faulkner’s work, the issue of white racism and the worth of black life all but vanished as a major theme in American literature following that war. By the 1950s, virtually all American universities had excluded black writers from their curricula (and black professors from their faculty).

By the late 1960s, however, the times were a-changing. The Civil Rights and Black Power movements pushed a growing number of students to reclaim race-based literature in general. I had come to America a stranger to its peculiar racial realities, but I found the new call to resist racism irresistible. Racial and ethnic antagonism was hardly unknown in Trinidad. However, the “one drop” rule of white racial “purity,” and the resultant defensive solidarity among racially “impure” people rallying around their status as “Negro” or “colored” or “black” opened a brave new world for me. I joined the cause. I began to haunt the library stacks, seeking out neglected books by black writers who now seemed essential to my knowledge of America. My psychological, cultural, and political emancipation was at stake.

That’s when I first read Richard Wright’s Native Son (1940). The novel opens as an alarm clock breaks the slumbering, early-morning silence in a tenement building on the South Side of Chicago. That alarm awakens a young black man, Bigger Thomas. Unhappy and rebellious, he is known as a “white woman’s accident.” He then murders his black girlfriend. Hunted by the police, he is captured, tried, and awaits death when the novel ends.

Native Son in a level of violence involving racism that I had never encountered before in American literature. No writer had been harsher than Wright in depicting both white culture and black culture. He was a cold, clinical social analyst opposed to racism but also bitter in judging his fellow blacks. Opposing the bigoted capitalist system that shaped Bigger’s life, he nevertheless also refused to spare Bigger. In him, Wright created a “hero” almost as inhuman as the vicious rat Bigger kills early in the novel. This lack of humanity disturbed me. Reading Wright’s long essay “How Bigger Was Born” (written after the book was published), I realized the extent to which I had been influenced by the portrait of the black American in Wright’s novel.

I was challenged further when I realized that most of my young black American friends saw Bigger as a hero. This was also true of undergraduates I taught as an assistant in the first course on black fiction ever offered at Harvard (taught by Robert Hayden). Many’s death had driven me toward a new vision of what it meant to be an American. When, in fact, I was accused of being “Negroes, from what I’ve read.” And so on. It was even more upset by their virtual dismissal of black Bessie’s murder as mere collateral damage. To me, Bigger epitomized Wright’s deep pessimism about blacks and also the ideal of black self-love. His autobiography, Black Boy (1945), compounded this sense of pessimism. In two early paragraphs, he listed terrible, essentially irresistible, flaws: “I am ugly. A fact I am likely to express in words. It is this fact and the obviousness of the Negro’s unhappiness and unhappiness that had ever encountered before in American literature.

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I feel all right when I look at it that way.” He then sends an almost tender greeting, through Max, to the young white leftist, Jan Erlone, on whom he had been trying callously to pin Mary’s death: “Tell…Tell Mister…Tell Jan hello.”

Again, what are we to make of this rage and its expiation through murder? In a deeply racist society, is rage always justifiable? And is violence always necessary to its expression and its expiation? My grown son, although brought up in prosperity, well educated, and a genuine pacifist, claims to readily identify with Bigger’s rage. He asks me if I, too, have felt a similar rage. I assure him that on most days I’ve indeed felt rage against racism. However, the fact that he asks this question means that I’ve kept that rage something of a secret from him—although he has seen me lose control with whites from time to time. Ironically, some of those “secret” moments involved him as a boy. The fact that he was a child added to my anger. These were episodes in which whites tried, in their habitually sordid way, to humiliate or intimidate me in the presence of my son.

In general, I tried to deny those whites the perverse pleasure of drawing me into lashing out. I recall, for example, being in a new-car dealership with my son when he was a boy. Ignoring us (as still so often happens), the salesmen scurried shamelessly to speak to white customers or visitors. I thought that my son was too young to know what was going on, but finally he turned to me and said, in a way that was almost heartbreaking, “Dad, they’re ignoring us. They think we can’t afford any of these cars. Why?”

What was I to do or say? On that occasion and others like it, I suppose that I quietly tried to teach my son the virtue of staying calm in the face of provocation. But how can I, he asks me now as a grown man, not feel—not respect—a rage like Bigger’s? A murderous rage that might lead me (like Bigger) to smother some woman, bash in another’s head—too bad she’s black!—or simply go dead inside, like Bigger’s mother in her hapless dependence on religion? Good question, I answer. I tell him what I think is the truth. While I often feel enraged, and at times give in to anger, I am even more obsessed by the ideal of not losing in life. So much rage, so little time! To give in to rage is to risk losing, often ignominiously, the game of life in a white-dominated world that racists have rigged to ensure that we lose. Instead, I think we have an obligation to ourselves and to our children, for a start, to try to keep control when rage surges in us.

Which means constantly questioning rage. Some rage is irrational. Some rage is almost purely hormonal, as when many teenagers lash out at their parents. As blacks, we also need to understand that rage is universal. Wright himself eventually declared his key discovery that white Biggers, too, exist practically everywhere. Living among whites in the nineteenth century, Henry David Thoreau wrote that “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”

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This is perhaps Wright’s supreme achievement in Native Son. Taking black male rage to the maximum with Bigger, exploring both bad luck and conscious malevolence, as well as the forces of liberalism, radicalism, and bigotry, he made in his novel an enhanced interrogation of rage and racism. He did so in a narrative that makes moral art out of nearly intractable problems. For this reason, the novel remains an American masterpiece. It seems timeless, despite its dated elements—although the persistent and apparently insoluble deadly violence among young blacks in Chicago today must make us wonder if it is dated at all.

Arnold Rampersad is professor emeritus in the Humanities at Stanford University. His books include The Life of Langston Hughes (2 vols.) and Ralph Ellison: A Biography. For his work in biography, he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, and won the National Book Critics Circle Award. In 1991, he became a MacArthur Foundation Fellow. In 2011, President Obama awarded him the National Humanities Medal at the White House. In 2016, he received honorary doctorates from Harvard and Yale.
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How are you going to fight the revolution in thousand-dollar hoodies and six-hundred-dollar sneakers?"

His face worked the question under his neatly groomed Afro. Then he said, "You have a point there."

However pleased I was to have gotten that concession from him, I also knew that it was no sign of a changed state, no indication of an elevation in my son’s thinking.

In the following weeks, I told one friend after another about our fiasco at the Balenciaga store. Everyone asked the same question: "So why did you take him to the store in the first place?"

"Hey, I figured if he wanted to do that to himself let him do it."

"Wow, I can’t believe you didn’t give it in."

"No way. Of course, I felt bad for him."

"At least he has good taste," one friend said.

Elijah hasn’t found a job, despite his best efforts. But that is the least of our concerns. Like any parent, I want to see him go far in life, to avoid many of the mistakes I’ve made, and to accomplish more than I’ve accomplished. I want him to build a career and a life for himself. Easier said than done, of course. All the more so given that he’s a black male in America, and, for that reason, his efforts to simply be is no simple matter.

This society expects him to fail. My saying so is fact, not rhetoric.

In the summer of 2011, when Elijah was ten years old, we took a family trip to Italy—a total of three weeks in Rome, Florence, and Venice. It so happens that, that later that fall, Italy became the topic of discussion in one of Elijah’s classes. As he reported to me after I picked him up from school that day, he told his teacher that he had been to Rome. His response is still funny to me—his story was a lie. When he told me this, the South Side, Chicago, in me came to life. I had asked for a vouch within the store. I left the store, he told me that he would try to find a t-shirt from Barcelona, since he couldn’t wear this non-name-brand product back home. Nor, for that reason, could we buy any other locally made clothing—shoes, belts, etc. (He never verbalized his line of reasoning, but I know). And whenever I brought him handmade clothing and jewelry from my travels across the African continent he would be polite and obliging toward me and accept the gifts, but he never wore them.

Elijah’s likes and dislikes in clothing were one element of a code of shared preferential limitations that he and his peers imposed on themselves. Basketball and football were (are) the only two sports they expressed any interest in. They read no books or magazines. They all watch the same TV shows, play the same computer games, and listen to the same music. These preferences point to broader limitations, for culture should be a sea of broad immersion, not a river that flows in one direction. Consider this fact in light of others: when you ride the subway in New York, you’ll notice that almost every black boy or man of a certain age wears sneakers by only one company. Appropriation has always been an important aspect of our improvisatory culture, but how is it that blackness has come to be defined by corporate logos?

But one cannot consider this question without taking into account an even larger phenomenon: the casual vanities and mistakes that our society affords young white people our society doesn’t extend to young black people, especially black boys.

What is minor for a white child is often major for a black child. A well-to-do white kid can don fly hip-hop gear without consequence. However, for an economically deprived black kid style is a far more freighted matter. In a society that views them as worthless, poor black kids often look to expensive gear and gadgets to give them a sense of self-worth. What you wear is who you are, who you are. Clothing is the first layer of armor in a dramatic projection of wealth and importance and invisibility. Body language (sicm) is the second layer—a talisman meant to provide a form of magical protection as one maneuvers through cutthroat streets. As the parents of such children, we should be weighted for their safety.

When Elijah was in his early teens, he thought that the space that was created in, known, and moved through neighborhoods in East New York, Far Rockaway, the Bronx, and Harlem—safe because they weren’t obvious war zones. Although he was a limited spaces, and we often thrive in these spaces and have given much to the world from these spaces. Our music, our style of dress, our vernacular, our food and our body language and other ways of being have had to rise above our particular locations to make their way out into the world. And so we have a powerful influence on other people, who seek to emulate our cool. However, too often we can’t imagine our own bodies transcending those places that we come from.

I had decided to make that family trip to Italy because I wanted Elijah to see that there was a very different world out there from the Brooklyn he knew.

The following summer, we went to Barcelona for a month. We had a great time, and Elijah was pleased by much of what he saw and what he did, but he also imposed his own limitations on his enjoyment. For example, he saw no reason to buy a $200 t-shirt from Barcelona, since he couldn’t wear this non-name-brand product back home. Nor, for that reason, could we buy any other locally made clothing—shoes, belts, etc. (He never verbalized his line of reasoning, but I knew). And whenever I brought him handmade clothing and jewelry from my travels across the African continent he would be polite and obliging toward me and accept the gifts, but he never wore them.

Elijah’s likes and dislikes in clothing were one element of a code of shared preferential limitations that he and his peers imposed on themselves. Basketball and football were (are) the only two sports they expressed any interest in. They read no books or magazines. They all watch the same TV shows, play the same computer games, and listen to the same music. These preferences point to broader limitations, for culture should be a sea of broad immersion, not a river that flows in one direction. Consider this fact in light of others: when you ride the subway in New York, you’ll notice that almost every black boy or man of a certain age wears sneakers by only one company. Appropriation has always been an important aspect of our improvisatory culture, but how is it that blackness has come to be defined by corporate logos?

But one cannot consider this question without taking into account an even larger phenomenon: the casual vanities and mistakes that our society affords young white people our society doesn’t extend to young black people, especially black boys.

What is minor for a white child is often major for a black child. A well-to-do white kid can don fly hip-hop gear without consequence. However, for an economically deprived black kid style is a far more freighted matter. In a society that views them as worthless, poor black kids often look to expensive gear and gadgets to give them a sense of self-worth. What you wear is who you are, who you are. Clothing is the first layer of armor in a dramatic projection of wealth and importance and invisibility. Body language (sicm) is the second layer—a talisman meant to provide a form of magical protection as one maneuvers through cutthroat streets. As the parents of such children, we should be weighted for their safety.

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big city kid, Elijah was also good-hearted and trusting, unaware of the desperation and dangers of many of those around us who were far less fortunate in terms of money and mobility. Despite my repeated admonitions that he should never leave the play-
ground, he could be lured away by supposed friends. I never told him what I knew—facts I often picked up in the barbershop,

facts about So-and-So who got bodied in a turf war, facts about the many So-and-So's who ended up bodied under similar cir-

cumstances. Or the story a barber had told me once about how he and his friend were out chilling one night, having a good time,

laughing it up, when his friend happened to see a rival gang member. How the friend pulled his piece, ran out on the dude,

and shot him point-blank in the head.

But, soon enough, Elijah became aware of those dangers. When he was in eighth grade, a classmate sent a photo to his

iPhone of a man lying naked and dead and bloooded in the rail-

way of the building where that classmate lived. Some weeks lat-
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store up the block. A few years earlier, he had been in the store one night when a group of masked men with guns barged in and

ordered everyone to get down on the floor. They were emptying

the cash register when a teenager wandered in. One of the rob-

bers pointed his rifle and shot the boy, spraying ferry with blood

and brain matter.

Elijah himself would be robbed later that year after a group of boys persuaded him to leave the park where they were shoot-
ing hoops to go shoot hoops in the playground in a housing proj-

ect. On the way there, an older and larger boy sneaked up behind

Elijah, put him in a headlock, took his iPhone, and ran off with it.

I was thankful that Elijah survived the incident without

injury. Still, the violation did its work on corroding his faith in

and understanding of the world. He became afraid to go outside,

and I tried to help him in different ways. He began to think of

decaying and offer life lessons. “Just imagine somebody being stupid

enough to risk a long prison sentence for a stupid phone,” I said.

I told him about the era in Chicago, back in the mid-eighties,

when many parents like myself fear—that phenomenon known as the

so-called “school-to-prison pipeline”—is that there are opportunities that children

don’t feel that they are worthy of competing with a student who

is white or who has money. They feel inferior. I don’t want any child to walk through these doors and not feel like he or she

can be number one.

My mom also taught me that it is okay to be a black woman. It is okay to be a smart black woman, and that we are supposed to move

other people up with us. I have this saying: “We lift as we climb.”

My mom’s friend (who was my teacher and then became my col-

league) always said to me, “When you move up, you pull someone

up.” So when I am in a position to hire people, I look at how I can

empower those around me, especially people who might not get an

opportunity.

How would you describe your educational philosophy?

My thing, and an important thing to me, is to make sure that I provide my students with every opportunity possible. One of

the big pieces of education that separates the haves from the have-

nots—and this is especially true when we talk about the school-
to-prison pipeline—is that there are opportunities that children

and adults miss. (Sometimes just because you’re a black male or

think you of your people are negative you don’t think that something

know what’s possible. Sometimes, as a child, when the only images

you see of your people are negative you don’t think that something

like a black male scientist is possible. I’m all about opportunities. I’m all about giving children what’s needed so they can go on to the

next phase of their lives and feel confident and feel like they belong.

What would you say to parents who are thinking about sending their kids to more “desirable” schools outside of their communities?

Folks think the grass is greener on the other side. I’m part of a pro-

gram called New Leaders for New Schools. It’s a preparatory pro-

gram for urban leadership. A year before Brighter Choice opened, I

was able to travel the country to see schools that were considered the best of the best. I visited top academic schools and some that

were considered low, normal zoned schools that were across the street from a project. You would look at them from the outside and

say, “I would never send my child there.”

But what I discovered was that the coveted schools often did not have anything more special than some of those schools that

were across the street from the projects. What they did have was

a group of parents who thought that that school was special. They

had a lot of parents who were smart, articulate, had money, and

could raise money for PTAs. Often, those families were sending their

children outside of their neighborhoods, away from their friends,

away from what they know to go somewhere else, and because the

teachers and students weren’t from the community there was no

fellowship. You just had a bunch of people who made themselves feel elite. Oh, my go to such and such school and that makes

me special, and they all walked around with that mentality and it

bothered me so.

Every community school leader should have a vested interest in

the school that he or she is leading. I wrote the charter for Brighter

Choice. I grew up in this neighborhood. My mom still lives in this

neighborhood. I love this neighborhood. I love my school. I love

my students. I love this. You want people in the community school to love

the community.

I think that community is important. It is about families. It is

about relationships. It is about lifting people up. I don’t believe you have to go somewhere and search for whatever that gold, glittery

thing is. It is by being a part of the community. It is by loving your neigh-

borhood you don’t have that school, then it is about investing and

building that school up, because that’s better for the community.

I tell the children all the time: I want to be invited to your college

graduation. I want to be invited to your wedding. I want to be in-

vited to the celebration when you cure cancer. I want you to make me

proud. When you are part of a community that nurtures you and

believes in you, you have the tools to be your best self.
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“Just look, Elijah,” I said, “all that is neither here nor there. There’s one important thing to remember. There is little chance that you’ll get to the other side of the gun. Think beyond all that.”

“Thinking beyond has brought him this far, has kept him from getting caught up in the true and immediate threat that so many parents like myself fear—that phenomenon known as the “game,” the lifestyle of crime and violence that claims so many black boys and men. Then, too, Elijah is both happy and hopeful, unlike me at his age. I count my blessings.

One thing that makes it so difficult for me is that I’m not a student anymore. One thing that makes me special, and they all walked around with that mentality and it made me feel élite. Oh, my child goes to such and such school and that makes me proud. When you are part of a community that nurtures you and invites to the celebration when you cure cancer. I want you to make me proud. But what I discovered was that the coveted schools often did not have anything more special than some of those schools that were across the street from the projects. What they did have was a group of parents who thought that that school was special. They had a lot of parents who were smart, articulate, had money, and could raise money for PTAs. Often, those families were sending their children outside of their neighborhoods, away from their friends, away from what they knew to go somewhere else, and because the teachers and students weren’t from the community there was no fellowship. You just had a bunch of people who made themselves feel elite. Oh, my child goes to such and such school and that makes me special, and they all walked around with that mentality and it bothered me so.

Every community school leader should have a vested interest in the school that he or she is leading. I wrote the charter for Brighter Choice. I grew up in this neighborhood. My mom still lives in this neighborhood. I love this neighborhood. I love my school. I love Fabayo.”

Your mother taught you that representation matters. Why is that so important to your students?

Let me give you an example. I am conscious of the fact that we know the smartest students are in the front row. In our new educ- tics lab, my charge is to have a black male scientist teach that pro- gram, not just so that the African-American children here will have someone who looks like them, but that people know what’s possible. Sometimes, as a child, when the only images you see of your parents are negative you don’t think that something like a black male scientist is possible. I’m all about opportunities. I’m all about giving children what’s needed so they can go on to the next phase of their lives and feel confident and feel like they belong.

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LYNN NOTTAGE
EMMANUEL FELTON
CORNELIUS EADY
LUKE RAMPERSAD
ARNOLD RAMPERSAD
JEFFERY RENARD ALLEN
FABAYO MCINTOSH-GORDON
CLEDIE TAYLOR
KERRY JAMES MARSHALL
CARRIE MAE WEEMS
BARKLEY L. HENDRICKS
ZUN LEE
KRIS GRAVES