

## PIPELINE

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.

## Lincoln Center Theater Review

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# PIPELINE

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Gwendolyn Brooks (1917—2000) is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Annie Allen* and one of the most celebrated American poets. She served as consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress—the first black woman to hold that position. She was the poet laureate of the state of Illinois for more than thirty years, a National Women's Hall of Fame inductee, and the recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Endowment for the Arts. Her works include *We Are Shining*, *Bronzeville Boys and Girls*, *A Street in Bronzeville*, *In the Mecca*, *The Bean Eaters*, and *Maud Martha*. In 1966, Broadside Press reprinted her iconic 1959 poem "We Real Cool" in a bold design by Cledie Taylor, which is featured on our cover.

"We Real Cool" reprinted by consent of Brooks Permissions.

Back cover photos from the Fade Resistance archive, courtesy of Zun Lee.

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. 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

## 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 public and private 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.





# DAILY RESURRECTIONS:

## AN INTERVIEW WITH DOMINIQUE MORISSEAU AND LYNN NOTTAGE



*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 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. 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 always 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 did, 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 big 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 to me, 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 was supposed to be doing something, but I just sat down unconsciously and was mesmerized (Laughs) by her and her way of relating to the kids. My mama is such a great actress—she brings character and color, and she just loves to teach, and she loves to tell stories. I think my entry point into acting—and I don't think I've ever told her this—was through my mom.

And also through my father, because he had a video camera long before video cameras were things to have, back in the seventies, when you had to hold a microphone with the camera. When I was

growing up, he would put the camera on and let me just do whatever I wanted to do. Sometimes I would come home from school and he'd say, "Let's get a news report for the day." I would stand in front of the camera and say, "Today on the news..." I would write little skits for me and my neighborhood friends, and he would let us shoot what I would call my TV series. (Laughs) Growing up as a kid, I just got to play and use my imagination a lot.

**LN:** It's so interesting that you talk about your mom instilling a love for words in you, because my mother was also an elementary-school teacher, and I remember those times when I didn't have school, and I would go and sit in her classroom and listen to her read, and listen to her teach, and also being sort of enamored and in awe of this beautiful woman up there, keeping these young children rapt.

But also, like your mom, my mother always brought home books. Specifically, she brought home books written by African-American women, books 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 classroom 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.

**AG:** Is that the school you attended?

**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 at all in 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 up in Harlem, which I loved. I had a very rich and much more diverse experience there than I did at St. Ann's.

**AG:** That's the opposite 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 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 titling 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 fallout person. If there was ever 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. I hated them.

My mother reminds me of things I would yell at them and say to them when they made me mad. What made these kids want to just target me? But I realize, when I think back on it, that I went to a different school; I came home in a uniform every day. Both my parents were in my home. A lot of stuff separated me from them.

**LN:** It’s interesting to hear you say that, because I just think of the passage through my neighborhood on the way home from school, and how so often I had to explain to my mother why I surrendered my bus pass. (Laughter) The other kids would punch me in the chest. I was very much from the neighborhood, but there were those things that you talk about—that, really, within your own neighborhood make you stand out. The things that make you blend in in

high school are the things that make you stand out in your own neighborhood, and vice versa.

**DM:** That’s right.

**AG:** In my family we’re having the opposite educational experience, where my mixed-race son is going to a predominantly black school.

**LN:** 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. I would 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 those students was to be in service to them, like she’s been. That helped me navigate the privilege of my education.

**AG:** How did these experiences gird you for how tough the playwriting world is, and how 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 in this multicultural 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 at 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 who were doing 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.

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 C’s 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 things are the tools that I came armed with when I was trying to penetrate 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 Rahman, or Cheryl West, because I was actively seeking their work and had to find it for myself. That taught me to write the ticket that isn’t there, to write myself the roles that I’m not seeing produced at my schools—to make it happen myself.

Even though Lynn and I belong to two different generations, we’re all being swept 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.

**AG:** The beginning.

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

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 armoring 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.

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 don’t know what kind of muscles those are, but (Laughter)...

**AG:** You have them.





**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 challenging and littered with all these obstacles, 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:** *Sweat* 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 to give them a voice. Because 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. Because 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 how we got the president that we got, we talk about how we failed the working class. But a lot of times we talk about it as if we failed the white working class, because those are the people that we think voted for Trump in droves. 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 trying to put Band-Aids on all these bleeding wounds instead of stopping for a minute and going a little more macro, and trying to stop the source of the wounds from happening. That's not going to get us much further. The working class isn't just white, and that's part of the problem—that we keep missing the fact that there's a white 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.

I come from what we call a chocolate city, 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 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 of



those folks very well. To me, writing about their experiences is really just an extension of writing what I know, but that it speaks to this larger thing in the country just means that these are the people who are being ignored. I want a white working-class audience to see themselves in a black working-class family. Or white teachers, teaching in a predominantly black environment, with mostly black and Latino workers. If we can see ourselves in each other like that, then maybe we would know that we have much more common ground than we think we do.

**AG:** How does your work writing for the TV show *Shameless* play into this discussion of class and race? And is it difficult to switch between playwriting and TV?

**DM:** It's hard to write for TV, because it's not playwriting, and I didn't know how it worked when I first did it. There are no instructions; no one gives you a lesson before they hire you. It's just jump in and trial by fire. I didn't have a rulebook or any guidelines. But what I have been able to learn from my co-writers (some of whom are for-

mer playwrights and some of whom are still practicing) is that writing in collaboration is very different. We think of stories together. When I come on to someone else's show, I'm serving their story, not necessarily my own, and I have to bring my own voice to someone else's vision. That requires me to be a writer in service to other writers, as opposed to being a writer in service to my own story. That's been an interesting transition.

But, also, *Shameless* is a show about American poverty in a meritocracy. We often talk about the characters on our show who we think would have voted for Trump, and the characters on our show who would be divided around the same things that the nation is divided by, and the fact that our characters are by and large the people we think society is ignoring. We satirize them, and we satirize the issues around them, and we satirize the fear of poverty, but at the core of what we're looking at is the stress of being the poor working class, and how we feel the nation has turned its back

on these people, that it's repelled by them, and so then what do you do around that?

For me, in that sense, the transition wasn't hard at all, because that's the world I've been writing about, mostly a predominantly black world, and I'm just shifting it now to a predominantly white world, and I'm realizing that there are a lot of principles at play that are the same. That's been really interesting. I'm the only person of color in my writer's room, so that's been its own challenge for me. I haven't been the only person of color in a room since I was in college.

I realize that's because most of the rooms I've been in ever since have been of my own design. I don't design a room in which I'm a minority. That's not the design I go with, mostly. (Laughter) It means that I have to make sure that I'm bringing a lot; that I'm speaking up for my perspective and how important it is in the room. I think that my perspective is welcome even if my point isn't always the winning point. I think my perspective is wanted there, and that's why I'm there.



# A BRIGHTER CHOICE

*by Emmanuel Felton*

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. Those facts often put me in awkward situations. One night, my senior year of high school, I 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 we 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 two 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—seeming surprised—how nice the houses were and complimented mine. This made me feel both proud and irritated: he knew so little about my neighborhood. I went to bed that night feeling self-righteous about how much more I knew about New Orleans and its people, impervious 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 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 institution that has produced some of the pillars of New Orleans's African-American community. My mom's parents met there. But by the time I was growing up 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 segregated schools concentrate and amplify the myriad issues that come with growing up poor and black in America. These schools were almost certainly doomed to failure.

In 2001, when my family began looking for a high school for me to attend, Clark placed close to the very bottom of the state's

ranking system. But that wasn't something we had to think about; sending me to the school I could see out my bedroom window was a thought that never crossed my parents' minds. My family had abandoned the idea of public education decades before I was born. My dad and his brothers and sisters were among the first black kids to integrate the city's white Catholic schools. I went to Isidore Newman School, a private school where tuition and fees surpassed the \$20,000-a-year mark and where, in 2006, I was one of only seven black students in a graduating class of more than a hundred.

I can see the intuitive appeal of using money the government would otherwise spend on public schools to allow families to escape to private schools of their choice. It's the central tenet of President Trump's plan for reforming American education: Give more families access to the kind of school choice that has always existed in America for those who can afford it.

Then I think back to that awkward drive home years ago, and the subtle alienation I felt growing up in a state of suspension 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 neighborhoods 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 childhood 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 government 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 taxpayer-funded vouchers. It was an idea that originated, in part, in

the black community. Annette Polly Williams, sometimes called the mother of the school-choice movement, was dismayed by the public-school options available to her four children. The Mississippi native had sent them instead to Urban Day Academy, a mostly black private school that ended with eighth grade, and was looking for a high school for her oldest daughter. The city was still under a court order to desegregate, which meant that whites had a much better shot at gaining a seat at the predominantly black schools in her neighborhood. Williams completed the high-school assignment form but didn't get a single one of her choices. She and other black activists wanted schools outside the public system that they could create and control. Allying with suburban white conservatives, Williams and her coalition fought for and helped pass the most sweeping school-choice law at the time.

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 repeat visits to Milwaukee's suburbs, he promised to bring order and prosperity to cities like Milwaukee. In his speech, he railed 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 school systems in the country." He went on to blame the city's Democratic leadership 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 his central education-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. The hope was that not only would vouchers benefit the students opting for private schools but the competition from private schools would also force the city's long-struggling public schools to improve. The program never managed to achieve either of its goals.

The nation's oldest voucher program now allows nearly twenty-eight thousand students to attend private, mostly religious schools, while another seventy-six thousand children attend district schools and seven thousand go to public charter schools. Last year, twenty-seven percent of students attending voucher schools passed state reading tests, compared with twenty-six percent at district schools and just over a third at charter schools. The math scores are even more discouraging, with just sixteen percent of voucher and public-school students passing state tests.

There are high-performing voucher schools, but many of those schools have rigid admissions deadlines, don't offer free transportation, and often mandate parental involvement, such as attendance at parent-teacher conferences—something that can be difficult for parents who lack reliable transportation. That means these schools are less likely to enroll the kids with

the greatest need and more likely to enroll those with the savviest parents.

All of this competition has also resulted in both public and private schools fighting for students, even as the city's student population continues to decline. Urban Day Academy, the school that Williams championed, closed its doors last year after converting from a traditional private school to one heavily dependent on vouchers, and, finally, to a charter school, without ever finding a way to make the numbers work.

When the Wisconsin legislature started the Milwaukee voucher program, lawmakers included money for an experimental 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 systems, 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 collectively—perform about as well as similar high-poverty voucher-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 competition, will be the only way to improve the city's diffuse network 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 various school "sectors." The program focuses on eight problems, including 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 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 Gwen T. Jackson Early Childhood and Elementary School. Jackson 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. Kanika Burks, the principal at Jackson, 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 family that had been in a car accident a few blocks away.

Milwaukee Succeeds has successfully piloted a program at Jackson called Transformative Reading Instruction, in which coaches give teachers simple tips on bolstering students' read-



*When a child's future is at stake,  
questions of broad social policy go out  
the window.*

ing skills and dealing with behavior-management issues. When Burks saw that students in the program were making progress, she went back to Milwaukee Succeeds and asked for help addressing students' social and emotional needs. Milwaukee Succeeds paired the school with a group called Growing Minds, which focuses on mindfulness.

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 excited by the prospect that the work on social-emotional issues tested at Jackson will be adopted by other schools in her home-

town. "Before, we had more tantrums," she says. "Teachers were very stressed out, saying, 'I don't know what to do.' Now we say, 'Okay, let's stop, take a breath, and collaborate.'"

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 much larger cultural shift and an about-face from government at all levels.

But I recognize that it's hard to cede 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 cowboy-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 reporter with access to the latest research, I knew that no matter what school my niece attends she'll likely excel, given her parents' resources. 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-connected 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 erodes the public good. When a child's future is at stake, questions of broad social policy go out the window. Although my niece is the fourth generation in our family to be born into relative comfort, she is a black child; her connection to privilege can still feel too tenuous to risk.

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# GWENDOLYN WAS HERE

by Cornelius Eady

*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 wail 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 masterwork.

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 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’ve 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

Strike. They Sing. They Jazz. They Die. This is the “cool” that hangs 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 speaker 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 in rage and humiliation against our ears, that would be beaten against our bodies 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 wolf around? Our young bodies didn’t know the traps our mothers knew were ly-

ing 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 folky 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 stares back at your gaze and doesn’t give a shit what you think.

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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.



# FATHER FIGURE

by Zun Lee

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.



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



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



Guy Miller and daughter Lanae at home during some rare downtime. Bronx, New York. December 2012.





Jerrell and Fidel Willis enjoying the sunset over downtown NYC. New York, New York. November 2012.



Jerrell Willis and son Fidel playing hide-and-seek on the rooftop of their apartment building. New York, New York. May 2013.

# MY FATHER AND I READ *NATIVE SON*

by Luke Rampersad

*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 instincts tell 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 replied.

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 headlights 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 Chevalier. 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. To Chevy and me, the incident was a routine experience that we'd mention in passing to friends the next day during lunch break 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 took his mother's car out after that, and I avoided driving on that stretch of road for the rest of my time at high school.

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 all the same. I learned maddening things about America's historical treatment of blacks that my white friends never had to learn.

I know that the rage is there in many of us, and that it's going to be expressed one way or another. It isn't usually expressed through violence. Art, which sublimates but also mimics rage at times, can become a prime surrogate for resistance. It may seem explosive in its form to match the volatility inside the artist. The dance may be explosive, the music rowdy. But we know instinctively that these qualities are appropriate, necessary. All that is inside cannot be expressed fully in muted tones and somber notes. In some forms, like rap, the artists are literally reporting on violent things they've witnessed in their own neighborhoods.

The use of artistic language to express our rage and resistance does not exist with sufficient precision in the vocabulary of the people who oppress us, whether intentionally or unintentionally. So we play new chords and invent new media—singing, rapping, painting, and dancing in ways not seen before. And society often shuns those new efforts, because it doesn't understand them at first. Black art then often has to be translated if it's to be taken into white spaces, or toned down so as not to offend. But something is lost in the process. The opportunity to spark a conversation is sometimes missed, so it's an imperfect dialogue. But then we must remember, I suppose, that all dialogues of this sort, involving art and resistance, are by necessity imperfect. And yet we must try to express ourselves and to communicate. Either we express ourselves freely or we'll be driven mad by the injustices we perceive.

We can destroy or we can create. Each impulse feels right at times; both can certainly be powerful. Ultimately, however, only one is sustainable and genuinely empowering.

*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 Solace.*

# MY SON AND I READ *NATIVE SON*

by Arnold Rampersad

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 soon kills a white woman by accident. He then murders his black girlfriend. Hunted by the police, he is captured, tried, and awaits death when the novel ends.

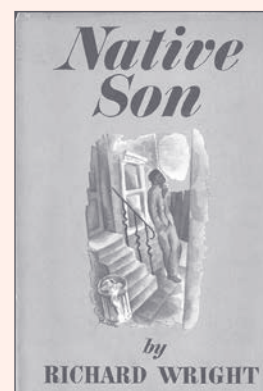
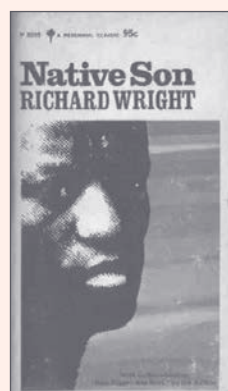
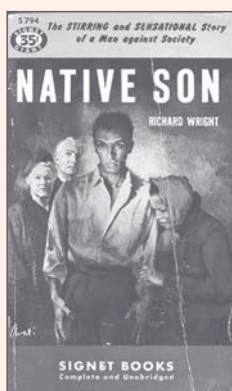
*Native Son* awoke in me a level of violence involving racism that I had never encountered before in American literature. No writer had been harsher than Wright in depicting both white culture and black culture. He was a cold, clinical social analyst opposed to racism but also bitter in judging his fellow 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 just after the book came out) only added to my confusion.

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 Roger Rosenblatt). Mary's death seemed to them some sort of heroic action, when, in fact, it was an accident, albeit one precipitated by racism; I 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 irreversible, flaws in black culture. At some point, he declared, he had begun "to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair." And so on.

I was not alone in regretting Wright's catalog. 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 shackled white American capitalism and racism, on the one hand, to black social incompetence and pathology, on the other. No wonder, then, that most 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 emancipate 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 'em." 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'm all right.





*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.*

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 salesman 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."

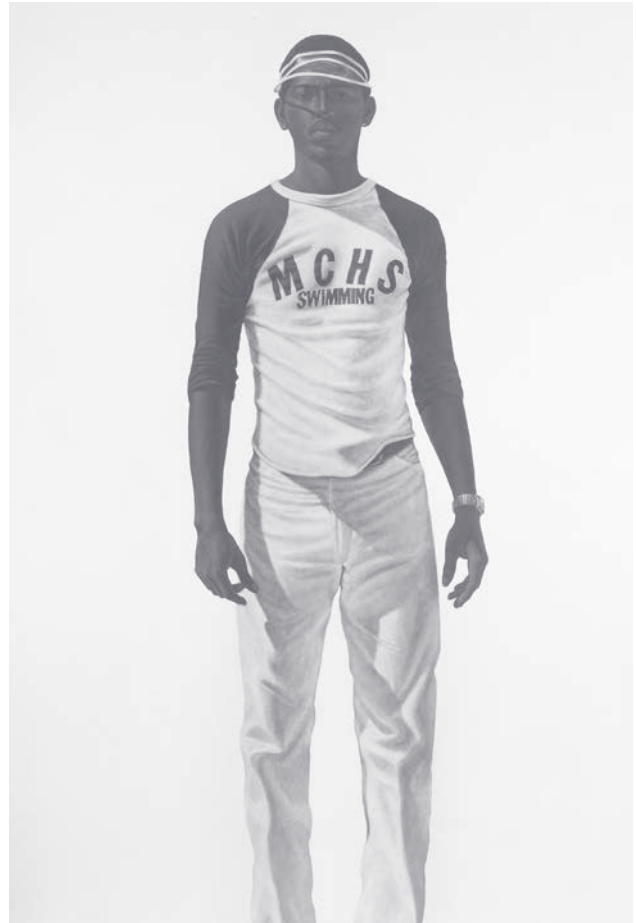
This is perhaps Wright's supreme achievement in *Native Son*. Taking black male rage to the maximum with Bigger, exploring both bad luck and conscious malevolence, as well as the forces of liberalism, radicalism, and bigotry, he made in his novel an enhanced interrogation of rage and racism. He did so 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.

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# SO THAT WILL BE THE FUTURE AND MY SON ELIJAH NASIR ALLEN'S PLACE IN IT

*by Jeffery Renard Allen*



Last September, my sixteen-year-old son, Elijah, and I made plans to do some back-to-school clothes shopping in Manhattan. I left it to Elijah, my firstborn, to choose the stores where we should look, since he's very particular when it comes to clothes, his sense of style different from mine, his sense of value as well. Our budget was the only matter we agreed upon in advance. His store picks included Bloomingdale's, Saks Fifth Avenue ("I know they have some things on sale," he said), True Religion, Urban Outfitters, and Levi's—all name-brand stores. We have had a long-standing conflict over this whole matter of name-brand clothes that started not long after he entered middle school. (Listen, I made a \$150 mail-order purchase of a pair of Jordan sneakers he wanted, only for him to determine that they were knockoffs; he refused to wear them.) Be that as it may, I voiced no objection to his store picks, and we set about it.

As might be expected, he could find no items comfortably priced within our modest budget—"No, I can't pay two hundred dollars for a pair of jeans, even if they're on sale; Elijah, you could buy three shirts for the price of that one"—so after two or

three hours of browsing we purchased nothing. But that didn't deter Elijah from wanting to hit one last shop, a Balenciaga store. He was particularly interested in trying on a pair of sneakers that he'd seen on the store's Web site.

"So let's do it," I said.

We did. At the store, he went through all the motions, trying on the sneakers in question, then requesting that the salesperson show him the shoes in several different colors, then deciding on the color he liked best and first trying that one on in his size before going one size larger for comfort.

"This is the one I want," he said.

"Good," I said. "I'm glad you like it."

From the look on his face, I could tell that he knew I wasn't going to buy the sneakers, which, with tax, sold for more than six hundred dollars.

After we left the store, he told me that he would try to find a part-time job right away.

"Great," I said. "Save as much money as you can between now and Christmas and maybe I'll help you buy them then." Then I took it a bit further. "Elijah," I said. "Let me ask you something.



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 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 my 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, 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. Her response was that he was a liar. When he told me this, the South Side, Chicago, in me came out and I started using every vile word I could think of to label his teacher.

Had I acted on my first impulse, I would have gone to the school the next day and got right up in his teacher's face, which wouldn't have been good for her or me or Elijah. We live in a society in which my behavior would have surprised no one, since it would have been further proof of that endangered animal, the angry black man. So I decided to raise the ruckus in such a way as to cut her limited assumptions about my son (and all black boys and men, who are either poor or perceived to be poverty-stricken) right out from under her.

That evening, I searched through the many photos from our trip to Italy, then printed out glossy postcards of the best ones—an entire stack, including one of me and Elijah standing in front of the Colosseum, and another one of us in the courtyard outside the Vatican. The next day, I instructed Elijah to hand the photos to the teacher at the start of class and to say to her, "Don't ever call me a liar."

Here it is important to note that my son's teacher was a fellow African-American. We as black people stand in the way of other black people. Racial and class assumptions eat away at all of us from the inside—black, white and other. Ghettos were designed with the exact purpose of setting limitations, to create spaces defined by geographic barriers. Black people live in these

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 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 what you are, who you are. Clothing is the first layer of armor in a dramatic projection of wealth and importance and invincibility. Body language (skin) 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 shoulder weighted concerns for their safety.

When Elijah was in his early teens, he thought that the spaces that we lived in, knew, and moved through—neighborhoods in East New York, Far Rockaway, the Bronx, and Harlem—were safe because they weren't obvious war zones. Although he was a

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 playground, 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-Sos who ended up bodied under similar circumstances. 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 up 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 bloodied in the hallway of the building where that classmate lived. Some weeks later, our neighbor Terry told us why he never went to the corner 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 robbers pointed his rifle and shot the boy, spraying Terry 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 shooting hoops to go shoot hoops in the playground at a housing project. 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 physical injury. Still, the violation did its work on corroding his faith in and understanding of the world. He became afraid to go outside. Hoping to alleviate his distress, I tried to maintain decorum 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 people were shot dead because somebody wanted their Jordan sneakers or Starter jacket. I told him about the heart-crushing poverty I’d seen time and again in Africa, about how thankful most people there were to wear any clothes, however old or tattered.

And all of this was true. But it went in one ear and out the other. As time went on, as Elijah’s fear eased and he wanted to be out in the world again with his friends, more and more of our conversation became about clothing, his imagination swayed by the prospect of wearing a certain pair of limited-release sneakers, or a three-hundred-dollar belt, or this shirt or that jacket—in short, any X, Y, or Z his friends had that he didn’t have.

My confidants advised that I exercise patience. Teenagers are teenagers, they said, and in time he’ll grow out of it all and become interested in all the things that interest you—books and art and travel and history. But I didn’t see how I could be so casual when the reality was that people around us were dying over phones and sneakers and turf.

So one day I said to my son flat out, “Look, Elijah. You need to remember something. Most of your friends won’t finish high school. Most of your friends will never go to Rome or Barcelona or Johannesburg or Zanzibar. Most of them will never go anywhere or do anything. Most of them will end up in jail or dead.”

And by such means the serpent bites its tail. I, too, am guilty of imagining the worse for men who are black and poor.

I should tell you that I’ve seen some changes in Elijah over the seven months since I took him to the Balenciaga store and let him “do that to himself.” I won’t take credit for it, though. In part, it started last fall, when he told me that he had to write a research paper for his college-level English course and he had decided to write something about the Black Lives Matter movement but had no idea where to begin. I suggested that he do some research on Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, and the Black Panthers. I directed him to a few articles, and I purchased a few books. For the first time, I saw him take an interest in reading. We had many conversations as he culled notes and worked on drafts of the essay. I could see his intelligence opening up, his coming to realize that life itself is a mysterious darkness worth penetrating.

I told him about my fuzzy memories of Fred Hampton’s assassination in Chicago, what I remembered overhearing my mother and other people say about it. All of this led to an organic conversation about what to do and what not to do when a cop approaches him. (Speak in such a way as to let him know that you can think. But be polite. Ask if you can phone your father, the university professor. That is, let him know who you are, what you are. Say what you must. Do what you must. Live to fight for another day.)

“But 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 die at the hands of a cop. 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.

These days, we spend a good deal of time deliberating about his plans for college—what he should major in, where he should go.

“I want to leave New York,” he says, “but I only feel comfortable in New York.”

I tell him that I regret not leaving Chicago for college. I tell him, “You need to test your wings.”

And so our conversation continues, this back-and-forth, give-and-take, that can never end.

*A professor of creative writing at the University of Virginia, Jeffery Renard Allen is the author of five books, including the novels *Rails Under My Back*, which won the Chicago Tribune’s Heartland Prize for Fiction, and *Song of the Shank*, which was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award. His short-story collection *Holding Pattern* won the Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence. His other honors include a Whiting Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a residency at the New York Public Library’s Center for Scholars and Writers, and a residency at the Bellagio Center in Italy.*

# WE LIFT AS WE CLIMB:

## AN INTERVIEW WITH FABAYO MCINTOSH-GORDON

*Fabayo McIntosh-Gordon is the principal of Brighter Choice Community School in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn.*

### **Growing up, what was your education like?**

I went to a school outside of my neighborhood. It was an IGC (Intellectually Gifted Children) school, and we were considered the elite students. But my family was very down-to-earth, and it was always important to my mom that I had a balance. She was always really clear on me understanding who I was as a black child. My mom was very Afrocentric in the seventies. She changed her name from Mary to Naima when she was a teen. She was rocking natural hairstyles before it was a fad. She was always very conscious.

At that time, if you were gifted you were in a classroom with a white teacher, and so, while I had many white teachers at school, at home my mom was drilling into me that representation matters, being who you are and understanding who you are in this world matters. My mother taught me to always feel confident. I was fearless. I made mistakes. I tried. Some kids are missing the confidence to fail, to try, to compete with anyone. In some neighborhoods and families, people have been shut down and they don't feel that they are worthy of competing with a student who is white or Chinese or whatever. 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 colleague) 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, as an educator in an elementary school, 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 because you grew up in a certain area and your parents couldn't send you to whatever the hot school was.) There are inequities in education and, depending on where you go, depending on how savvy your parents are, it can either make or break a child.

I get students who come from homeless shelters. I get students whose families are chronic shelter people, so the kids never get any real stability. It's not their fault. These are the type of people whom folks won't give an opportunity. People, unfortunately, are attracted to what shines. If you see the child who is always put together nicely, people want to help that child. My philosophy is to help everyone.

### **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 need more black male teachers in this school. For our new robotics lab, my charge is to have a black male scientist teach that program, not just so that the African-American children here will have someone who represents them—that's needed—but so that people 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 program called New Leaders for New Schools. It's a preparatory program 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 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 Bed-Stuy. I love this. You want people in the community school to love the community.

I believe 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. You can find gems in community schools. If in your neighborhood 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 invited 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 less of a chance of going out into the world not feeling confident, and you have the tools to be your best self.



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