

Richard Wright Newsletter

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Those "Wright" Lines

by

James L. Hutchinson, M.D., San Mateo, California

The "Wright" lines all began in the fall of 1943 when I had been sent by the U.S. Government to serve as a soldier in the cavalry, but instead I was chosen to be a houseboy for the major and his wife.

The major and his wife resided in a lean-to shanty in Bracketville, Texas, three miles from the Army post on which I was stationed. This was headquarters for some of America's finest black men -- college graduates or near-graduates. However, the first sergeant was nearly illiterate, a product of the regular Army when blacks were almost all laborers and domestics. When war broke out, he was promoted to first sergeant due to seniority and servility. When put in charge of these college students, he felt threatened and confused daily. The white officers, however, thought nothing of the situation, for they felt black intellect did not exist and that we were all equal mentally.

Against this backdrop, early one morning I was singled out at reveille to fall out of line and was driven by the colonel's chauffeur to the major's home to assume my soldier's duty as a houseboy to his wife. At this time, I did not know where I was going or what my duties would entail. Of course, young and believing in the war for democracy, I thought I was being tapped for some super secret detail which would assist in defeating Hitler or the Japanese sooner. I never dreamed what was in store for me when the colonel's chauffeur-driven Jeep deposited me at this "Last Picture Show" type Texas shanty. A young white lady, the major's wife, greeted me and told me to come in. She explained to me that I was to be her handyman, in other words, a domestic servant. I could sense an air of embarrassment in her as she explained what my duties were.

Many times since that summer of '43, I have

been in strange situations, but none seem so vivid as that humid morning in a dusty Texas town. I suddenly remembered my father's words when I informed him the year before when I had volunteered for the Army. After the white recruiting officer who came to our college campus said that, with my education and aspirations to be a medical doctor, I would be sent to Officer's Candidate School. Dad said, "Son, don't believe it. Your country will lie to you as it had to me." Standing in that ill-decorated shanty, I wondered out loud, "Is this what my country wants of me, to be a houseboy, not to defend democracy?"

After the major's wife finished explaining what she expected of me, she left for the Mexican town just across the border. I proceeded to wax the floor, clean the stove and put the house in working order.

Every day after reveille, the colonel's chauffeur would drive me to the major's small home where I would do my soldier's duties. It was at a moment when I was devouring "Native Son" that the major's wife came in unexpectedly. She had always returned after I left, since, I am sure, the major had told her never to be alone with me. She stared in amazement when she saw me reading "Native Son" and asked, "What do you know about a book like that?" I said in fact, my aunt Carolyn had sent it to me from Sacramento. The major's wife turned crimson and asked incredulously, "What are you doing here then?" I simply stated, "Mrs. 'W', this is what my country needs and expects me to do." The major's wife began questioning me about my background, my aspirations, ambitions and so forth. I told her I had studied pre-med and had hoped that through the ASTP, Army's Special Training Program, to enter medical school.

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She again seemed embarrassed and, before I left that day, promised to help me in some way.

Later I learned what had set her apart from the other white officers' wives of that day. Mrs. "W" was young, Jewish, a university student who had married the major before finishing college. Here was a bright young woman thrown into a non-intellectual situation and surely chafing at the bit. She probably married the major thinking that she was helping the war effort in some misguided way, as the major was a bumbling type and seemed intellectually inferior to her.

On evenings and weekends, I occasionally ran into other soldiers from my home town or college and avoided them, as I felt soiled serving my country as a houseboy in fatigues.

One day, after completing my chores at the major's house, I was summoned to the first sergeant's office. He told me I had been transferred to a medical technology school in El Paso where I was to train as a medical technician. Thus I would earn a spec number, which is a badge of some sort in a faceless army. I immediately thought of "Native Son" and the encounter it brought me with the major's wife that hot summer afternoon.

At Williams Beaumont General Technical School, I finished in the top percentile of my classes and returned to my outfit, which was being geared for overseas duty that winter of 1944. We sailed to Casablanca on the Billy Mitchell to become a part of the invasion forces of the Italian campaign. My entire division at Fort Clark, Texas had been a medical outfit and we trained only with bandages and stretchers, never guns. Our duties were to be corpsmen in the infantry.

On arrival in Oran, North Africa, we immediately were placed in a replacement depot at Canestel, and our division dismantled. Disillusionment set in everywhere, as no one seemed to know what our fate was to be. When we started daily at the beautiful Mediterranean, we could see the armadas of ships all headed for the invasion of Southern Italy.

Suddenly, one day we were called to assemble with our equipment packed and we were to proceed to the Italian front with our first aid kits. While we were waiting, the first sergeant called my name, "Pvt. James L. Hutchinson," and asked me to step out of line. I was to work as a medical technician at the replacement

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**The George Washington University
Department of English
801 22nd Street NW
Washington, DC 20052
Phone: 202/994-6743
Fax: 202/994-7915
EMail: jam@gwu.edu**

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depot dispensary on base because of the spec number until VJ Day, which I had earned in Texas with the help of the major's wife.

While working in the clinic and dispensary one day, I saw a wounded soldier, Tillman Bibbs, who was in formation with me the day I was slated to ship out to the Italian front. Incidentally, Bibbs and I started out our Army career together at Camp Pickett, Virginia in June 1943. I asked him why he was back in Africa so soon and what had happened on the front. Incredulously, he related to me a horror story that has never left my psyche these 50 years or more. Bibbs stated that on the Monte Cassina beachhead, the casualty rate was so unusually high that the corpsmen were never trained to be infantrymen, but because this was a segregated unit, what did it matter if a black infantryman was killed -- replace him with a corpsman who didn't know how to use a rifle. In this way, the quota system was intact.

Many times I have flashbacks of "Native Son" (blue bound) in that Texas cottage and my encounter with the major's wife who was compelled to help me, thus saving me from the Mt. Cassina massacre.

So, now 56 years later from the publication of "Native Son," I am eternally grateful to Wright -- but for the grace -- I would be buried in Southern Italy or maimed beyond help in some veteran's home.

So it is those lines -- the Wright lines -- of my patron saint that I salute forever. For these tangible and intangible reasons, I made a pilgrimage in June 1996 to Richard Wright's crypt and left a bouquet of flowers at Pere Lachaise Cemetery, Paris, France one sun-kissed day.

Bigger's Body

by

Robert Felgar, Jacksonville State
University

In the unexpurgated edition of Native Son, on the page opposite the dedication to Wright's mother, appears the standard sentence All of the characters and situations represented in this book are fictional and imaginary.¹ This claim is true not only of Bigger Thomas as a literary character but also of Bigger Thomas as a body, a body that provides us with a dark text that, when read carefully, reveals a set of assumptions about African American bodies that must be resisted, for they reduce Bigger to a metaphor and preclude his humanness, sometimes even in his own eyes.

Early in the novel, after Jack Harding and Bigger walk to the Regal Theatre to see Trader Horn, as actual movie first shown in 1931, they compete with each other to see who can masturbate first; Bigger says, "I'm polishing my nightstick" (472), a symbol for masculinity that suggests hardness, violence, policing, size, and autoeroticism, although since Jack is with Bigger (we cannot tell how closely they are seated next to each other), there is the suggestion of homoeroticism, too. Jack boasts, "Mine's like a rod" (473), a further implication that real men, and perhaps black men in particular, are heartless sex machines, only a brute strength women must endure. What Buckley later describes as "that dirty trick you and your friend Jack pulled off in the Regal Theatre" (731) can be read racially as Bigger's using his body to project his contempt upon the white world. Like Swift in his word play with Master Bates in Gulliver's Travels or Dickens with his Master Bates in Oliver Twist, Wright also amuses in a similar manner (cf. "Jack Harding") with his language about masturbation, but underneath the dirty joke is a black body reduced to an anatomical entity with tremendous cultural resonance: the black man as the black phallus. This notion, combined with the idea that Bigger might have a ("white") brain, is an extremely unsettling threat to the whites in Native Son. The presumed exceptionally powerful and dangerous combination sometimes sees the white world merely as something to ejaculate on. A nightstick

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with a brain is unacceptable to the whites. Buckley is so confused that he refers to Bigger as a moron; on the same page (831) reference is made to "that Negro's scheming brain." And a few pages later (834) he describes Bigger as "this worthless ape" but also as possessing "a human brain."

On a few other occasions, Wright also places Bigger's body in proximity to other male bodies: in Doc's poolroom, the homoerotic element in *Native Son* becomes obvious when Bigger tries to divert his gang's attention away from his own fear of robbing Blum's by humiliating Gus:

"Get up! I ain't going to ask you no more!" Slowly, Gus stood. Bigger held the open blade an inch from Gus's lips.
"Lick it," Bigger said, his body tingling with elation.
Gus's eyes filled with tears.
"Lick it, I said! You think I'm playing?"
Gus looked around the room without moving his head, just rolling his eyes in a mute appeal for help. But no one moved. Bigger's left fist was slowly lifting to strike. Gus's lips moved toward the knife; he stuck out his tongue and touched the blade. Gus's lips quivered and tears streamed down his cheeks. (481)

As for touching a white male, Bigger finds the thought of touching Jan repulsive. (507)

But more often, Bigger's body functions as reassurance to the whites that they are human and Bigger is not. That is why he is so often referred to as an ape (the celebrated *King Kong* appeared in 1933, just seven years before *Native Son* was published in its expurgated form: perhaps Wright is vaguely hinting at a parallel between Beauty, Mary Dalton, and the Beast, Bigger). In the expurgated version of the novel, Jack tells Bigger that if he were allowed into a white nightclub, the white patrons would "think a gorilla broke loose from the zoo and put on a tuxedo." (925, in Notes for the unexpurgated edition) In both the 1940 and the 1991 versions, Bigger is repeatedly referred to as an ape or an apelike creature, and he himself wonders, "Maybe they were right when they said that a black skin was bad, the covering of an apelike animal." (702) The single extended physical "description" of Bigger does not refer to the body of a human being but to a fantasy:

Though the Negro killer's body does not seem compactly built, he gives the impression of possessing abnormal physical strength. He is about five feet, nine inches tall and his skin is exceedingly black. His lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beast.

His arms are long, hanging in a dangling fashion to his knees. It is easy to imagine how this man, in the grip of a brain-numbing sex overpowered little Mary Dalton, raped her, murdered her, beheaded her, then stuffed her body into a roaring furnace to destroy the evidence of his crime.

His shoulders are huge, muscular, and he keeps them hunched, as if about to spring upon you at any moment. He looks at the world with a strange, sullen, fixed-from-under-stare, as though defying all efforts of compassion. (706)

This is a body the whites have assigned Bigger, a body they require to justify their fear and hatred of him; they see what they believe rather than the actual physical body of the protagonist. Why darkness indicates anything other than literal darkness or why it is considered a revealing social category are not issues they analyze at all, nor is the combination of dark color and "apelike" appearance something they give any thought to: in other words, this "description" of Bigger Thomas is a description of a body that exists nowhere but in their heads. Buckley switches from a mammalian metaphor to a reptilian one for dramatic effect: "Every decent white man in America ought to swoon with joy for the opportunity to crush with his heel the wooly head of this black lizard, to keep him from scuttling on his belly farther over the earth and spitting forth his venom of death!" (829) Now Bigger is physically repulsive because he is a dark-skinned lizard that lacks straight hair.

Bigger's attitude toward his own body is an alienated one, one of intense anxiety. Before his interview with Mr. Dalton, he is so tense that he cannot sit comfortably: "He felt that the position in which he was sitting was too awkward and found that he was on the very edge of the chair. He rose slightly to sit farther back; but when he sat he sank down so suddenly and deeply that he thought the chair had collapsed under

him. He bounded half-way up, in fear; then, realizing what had happened, he sank distrustfully down again.” (487) When Mr. Dalton looks at him, Bigger feels like a human map, something to be read in amused and quiet contempt by racially smug whites like Mr. Dalton. Such somatic self-consciousness does Bigger feel that he cannot stand up without considering the disposition of his body. With Jan and Mary, Bigger is at one point completely divorced from his body: “He felt he had no physical existence.” (508) Reinforcing Bigger’s sense of alienation from his own body are three references to him as a clown (575, 584, 638). As Wright makes abundantly clear, Bigger “chose” the wrong body for white America.

The one other black body in *Native Son* that Wright pays close attention to is that of Bessie Mears. Her body serves as a sexual convenience for Bigger, as something he can masturbate with (see page 570). He would prefer that she be nothing but a piece of meat, because a Bessie with a brain has autonomy that can be a barrier to Bessie the source of his sexual release:

He felt there were two Bessies: one a body that he had just had and wanted badly again; the other was in Bessie’s face; it asked questions; it bargained and sold the other Bessie to advantage. He wished he could clench his fist and swing his arm and blot out, kill, sweep away the Bessie on Bessie’s face and leave the other helpless and yielding before him. He would then gather her up and put her in his chest, his stomach, some place deep inside him, always keeping her there even when he slept, ate, talked; keeping her there just to feel and know that she was his to have and hold whenever he wanted to. (575)

In the passage that has come to be known as “Bessie’s Blues” (660), she moans to Bigger that she is painfully aware all she ever was to him is a sexually available female body. Infinitely more horrible and unsettling is his rape of Bessie just before he murders her by pounding her head in with a brick (664), a scene in which Bigger does indeed behave like an animal. The somatic Bessie is of so little consequence that neither Bigger nor his attorney have any idea that her corpse is going to be displayed as evidence at the inquest. The irony is this scene at the inquest is that the body of a black woman serves as evidence that Bigger smothered a white woman whose body he burned; a

black body Bigger raped is expediently substituted for an absent white one he did not rape, although Buckley assumes he did.

Wright knew all too well that he could not examine the cultural and social issue of the black male body without also taking into account the white female body. Bigger himself sees Mary’s body as an intersection of various categories: desirability, white sexual paranoia, the forbidden. In reality, she happens to be a physically small white woman (Wright imagined her as a small person partly so her corpse would fit into her trunk), but as a cultural artifact, she is far more: “very slender” (493), she is softer and of far higher cultural value than Bessie. (Her name suggests virginity and colorblindness.) There does seem to be a slight discrepancy in Wright’s description of her, as she is characterized by the narrator as “kind of pretty, but very little. She looked like a doll in a show window: black eyes, white face, red lips” (503), but a few pages later the narrator says “she was beautiful.” (522) That Bigger is not able to completely destroy Mary’s body certifies how powerful the image of the white female body is in his world, and in fact it does destroy him. A quiet irony in the body politics of *Native Son* is that Mary’s boyfriend, Jan Erlone, has, at least to some degree, the stereotypical physical appearance of the white American male --“He [Bigger] saw Jan: blond hair, blue eyes” (703) -- and yet he alone of the whites accepts Bigger as a human being, even after he learns Bigger has killed his girlfriend.

While *Native Son* is far more than a novel about body politics, it nevertheless addresses this issue with Wright’s usual power, and with particular emphasis on “racialized” and gendered bodies, especially as they help us understand what kind of culturally significant body Bigger has. Bigger’s body is a magnet for racist fantasies about African American males, fantasies that were and still are widely believed in white America. An ordinary human being, Bigger really does not have a bigger body, but as Wright so painfully knew, black facts have not fared well in the realm of white fantasy.

Light and Dark Images in Richard Wright's Haiku

by

Bridgette Brown, Undergraduate Student,
Mississippi Valley State University

One of the prevalent themes in Richard Wright's *Haiku: This Other World* is the union of the contrasting images of light and dark. Haiku 85 offers a good example:

Upon a pine tree,
A snail glides out of its shell
To witness the spring.

The shell represents darkness, and the spring represents the outside world with newness and light. When spring comes back, the snail leaves its shell of darkness, or its darkness of winter, to see the wonder in sunlight.

In haiku 770, the light image is concrete while the dark image is implied:

My guests have now gone;
The grate fire burns to white ashes, --
How lonely it is.

The fire is an image of light. However, darkness is suggested by the speaker's solemn tone. The room is empty and dark; the once brilliant and bright fire is disintegrating to ashes; and the speaker who reflects on the evening suddenly feels lonely after his guests are gone.

Light sometimes amplifies darkness, as one can see in haiku 32:

Just enough of light
In this lofty autumn sky
To turn the lake black.

In this poem, the image of light is represented by the moon-lit autumn sky. Because of the soft light in the night, the usually clear water appears to be black.

On the other hand, darkness amplifies light, as in haiku 9, a recollection of the South's beauty:

Steep with deep sweetness
O You White Magnolias,
This still torpid night!

In this haiku, a dark night serves as the backdrop of white magnolias. The images in this poem are not just light and dark; they are black and white. Here at night when nothing as all proves of interest to him, the speaker turns to nature and sees magnolias that are more beautiful and pleasant than ever. In haiku 764 the union of light and dark images symbolizes peace:

The oaken coffin,
Between the porch and the car,
Was christened by snow.

The coffin, associated with death, is the dark image. But, in this haiku, we see no sadness or grieving. The last line is a surprise. The light image of snow changes the role of the poem. To christen means to be spiritually reborn or to be purified, and this christening is done by nature. Rather than being bleak, the tone is hopeful. Haiku 60 exhibits more contrasts of light and darkness:

Sun is glinting on
A washerwoman's black arm
In cold creek water.

In this poem the sun glinting on a washerwoman's black arm produces a more brilliant light. This haiku has an underlying theme of uniting black and white. During his lifetime, Wright not only hopes that blacks can be treated as equals to whites, he desires a union of the races, a harmonious coexistence. Many of the poems that deal with light and dark images more specifically deal with black and white images. In haiku 790, there is more than one union of light and dark images:

In winter twilight
A black rat creeps along
A path in the snow.

The more obvious union is between "black rat" and "snow." Again these images are black and white. Twilight represents another union, the one between day and night.

Images of light and dark are found throughout Wright's haiku collection. Some of them represent the wonder in nature, as in haiku 85; some reveal Wright's desire for union between blacks and whites. However, this union of blacks and whites has never been achieved during his lifetime, even though it does exist in a harmonious way in his haiku, his other world created in the last eighteen months of his life.

Endesha Ida Mae Holland, 61, 'Mississippi Delta' Writer by Margalit Fox

Endesha Idae Mae Holland, a noted scholar and dramatist whose best known play, "From the Mississippi Delta," chronicled her journey from poverty and prostitution in the Jim Crow South to civil rights activism, a Ph.D. and an academic career, died on Jan. 25 at a nursing home in Santa Monica, Calif. She was 61.

The cause was complications of ataxia, a degenerative neurological condition, according to the University of Southern California, where she was an emeritus professor of theatre. Professor Holland, who retired from U.S.C. in 2003, previously taught in the American studies department at the State University of New York, Buffalo.

Partly financed by Oprah Winfrey, the Off Broadway production of "From the Mississippi Delta" opened in 1991 at the Circle in the Square Downtown. Directed by Jonathan Wilson, it starred Cheryl Lynn Bruce, Sybil Walker and Jacqueline Williams in the principal role, which depicted the author at various stages of her life.

Though it ran for 218 performances, the production received a mixed reception from critics. Few, however, disputed the hypnotic pull of Professor Holland's story. Ida Mae Holland -- she added

Endesha as an adult -- was born on Aug. 29, 1944, in the Delta town of Greenwood, Miss. She was reared along with several siblings in a wooden shack, its walls plastered with newspapers. She never knew her father; her mother, an esteemed rural midwife, sometimes took in local prostitutes as boarders to make ends meet.

When Ida Mae was 11, in an incident she often recounted afterward, she was raped by a white man who employed her as a baby sitter. When it was over, he handed her \$5.

"I knew I was a woman then," Professor Holland told *Ebony* magazine in 1992. "And since I didn't want to go to the cotton fields and work all day, I figured this was a way that I could make money. And I started turning tricks." The going rate, she said, was \$5 for black men, \$10 for white.

By her late teens, she had been arrested many times for street fighting, shoplifting and prostitution. One day, looking for a customer, she followed a young man to his office. He turned out to be a volunteer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which had come to Greenwood to register black voters.

"I saw and heard things in that office I had never seen or heard before," Professor Holland told *Ebony*. "I had never seen black people sitting down using typewriters or heard black people talking about civil rights or voter registration."

She became involved with the organization, marching, speaking and registering voters, and was jailed 13 times for her activities. In 1965, a suspicious fire broke out in her family's home, killing her mother. Professor Holland said afterward that she believed the Ku Klux Klan had firebombed the house in retaliation for her civil rights work.

Encouraged by colleagues in the movement, Ida Mae obtained a high school equivalency diploma and enrolled at the University of Minnesota. She earned a bachelor's degree in African-American studies there in 1979, followed by a master's in American Studies in 1984 and a Ph.D., also in American studies, in 1986. Professor Holland taught at Buffalo from 1985 to 1993.

The author of a half-dozen plays, Professor Holland remained famous for "From the Mississippi Delta," which has been performed by the Negro En-

semble Company, at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago and at the Young Vic in London. She wrote a memoir of the same name, published by Simon & Schuster in 1997.

Professor Holland's three marriages ended in divorce. She is survived by a sister, Jean Beasley; a brother, Charlie Nellums; a son, Cedric; and a grandmother, according to the University of Southern California.

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Call For Papers

Representing Segregation A special issue of *African American Review*

African American Review is soliciting papers for a special issue on Representing Segregation slated for publication in early 2008. Is there an identifiable literary tradition responding to, representing, or protesting US racial segregation? Examination of individual works, authors, genres, or movements are welcome.

Segregation -- as an historical condition, a political ideology, a municipal planning scheme, and a de facto social system -- profoundly shaped the lives of African Americans and other groups in the first half of the twentieth century, at least. Whether protesting, rejecting, refusing, or reaffirming segregation, numerous writers have necessarily responded to the history and experience of racial division in their literary projects. The past two decades of African American literary studies have evidenced great interest in the tropes, narratives, and legacies of slavery, migration, and diaspora within the literary imagination. In addition, in recent years scholars have studied specific practices of segregation in literature, most notably lynching. A broad inquiry into literatures of segregation is necessary to account for the literary legacy associated with practices of US racial segregation.

Possible questions individual articles might ask include, but are not limited to:

- Is there such things as a segregation narrative or a Jim Crow narrative? Is this a formalist, ideological, or historicist project?
- How have the historical conditions of racial segregation informed narratives of race, nation, and geography?
- What are the aesthetic techniques employed by Black writers to represent and protest racial segregation? Should these be in conversation with

apologist or white supremacist writers of segregation literature, such as Thomas F. Dixon?

- Where is segregation located? Is there a geography underpinning the literary imagination arising from segregation narratives? What place do segregation narratives have in literatures of migration?
- What is the relation between literatures of segregation and literatures of separatism or racial self-determination?
- How and why have writers from different ethnic or racial backgrounds borrowed, built from, or rejected African American representatives of segregation?
- Can transnational figures and texts like Richard Wright's expatriate writings, W.E.B. DuBois's Ghanaian citizenship, James Baldwin's European essays, or June Jordan's anti-apartheid work elucidate the way writers negotiate the domestic and the international within segregation?
- What does an African American literary tradition writ large look like from the vantage of a distinct tradition of literatures of segregation?

Send inquires or proposals to Brian Norman (normbria@isu.edu) and Piper Kendrix Williams (williamp@tcnj.edu). Inquires by December 15, 2006; completed papers are due by May 1, 2007. More information, including a link to the special issue website at <http://aar.slu.edu/>.

Renewal Notice

As you receive this issue of the Richard Wright Newsletter, we want to remind you to renew your membership in the Richard Wright Circle. The yearly \$10 membership fee runs for one calendar year and entitles you to one double issue of the Newsletter: Fall/Winter and Spring/Summer. In order to continue your membership, you need to fill out and send us the form below (to ensure that we have your latest address and relevant information) along with a \$10 check or money order (made out to the Richard Wright Circle). Please remember that your membership dues still constitute the primary funding for the Circle and Newsletter is greatly appreciated.

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