

Richard Wright Newsletter

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Richard Wright Reviews

Savage Holiday: Nakedness, Whiteness: Defining the Social Self

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"LA SAPIENZA"

Savage Holiday: A Novel, by Richard Wright.
With an Afterword by Gerald Early.
Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994. 235 pp.

Savage Holiday is a book about nakedness, literal and metaphorical. Literal: the main character, Erskine Fowler, is accidentally caught naked outside his apartment, which unleashes a chain of events culminating in the accidental death of a neighbor child. Metaphorical: Fowler is progressively forced out of all his social covers - his job, his social identity, his false memories. The two words of the title imply the same symbolism: *savage* stands for a space on the margins of "civilization," *holiday* for a marginal time in which all regular social activity is suspended. The tragedy begins on a Sunday.

All characters are white. In a number of black authors, experimenting with white characters has been an effort to prove their "universality" by stepping outside of the supposedly narrow limits of African American contexts. In *Savage Holiday*, whiteness, however, functions as a symbol in the black imagination. Tony Morrison speaks of white people as "men

without skins," and the white characters of *Native Son* are constantly described as "white blurs" or shapeless, "looming bulks."

The two words of the title imply the same symbolism: savage stands for a space on the margins of "civilization," holiday for a marginal time in which all regular social activity is suspended.

Whiteness, then, becomes functional to the central symbolism of nakedness, because it stands for a weaker, more diaphanous - blurred, indeed - definition of selfhood propped up by social conventions and power.

Savage Holiday is, therefore, to be seen as an integral part of Richard Wright's search for the existential essence of human beings, which makes its heretofore exclusion from the Wright canon entirely absurd. Certain formal analogies (for instance, the alliterating section titles, just as in *Na-*

tive Son and *The Outsider*, the bang bang of the drum as a symbol of orgasm just as in "Long Black Song") indicate that Wright intended this novel to be seen as a continuation of that search. It is certainly less powerful than *Native Son*, less ambitious (but also less cumbersome) than *The Outsider*, and we may not concur with Wright in the almost exclusive role he attributes to sexual guilt and repression. But its starkness generates at least some moments of effective writing, and the book as a whole also contributes to our understanding of Wright's other work.

To conclude, I would like to focus on one of the most interesting aspects of this intertextuality. In both *Native Son* and *Savage Holiday*, there are two deaths, one more or less accidental (Mary Dalton, Tony) and the other violent and

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bloody (Bessie, Mabel). Most reading of *Native Son* concentrate on the murder of Mary and treat Bessie's death as an almost unnecessary detour. In *Savage Holiday*, however, both the imagined primary trauma (the smashing of a doll as an image of Fowler's mother) and the actual murder are represented in terms that send us straight back to Bessie. Bigger Thomas smashes Bessie's head with a brick; Erskine Fowler "had taken a dirty brick bat and had beaten the doll's head in" (italics in text). Later, Bessie's body, "bloody and black," is displayed in the courtroom on a

"table"; tables, indeed, are one of the most pervasive symbols in *Native Son*. In *Savage Holiday*, Mabel's "bloody body stretched on the table" after she is killed; when Erskine tells the police what he has done, he reiterates, "Listen, the body's on the kitchen table."

Savage Holiday, then, sends us back to read *Native Son* with a different sense of its plot and symbolism: Bessie is at least as important as Mary, and the image of her smashed face and stretched, displayed body haunts Wright's imagination and returns in this later text. If only for this, the reintegration of *Savage Holiday* to the Wright canon is a welcome event.

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Announcements

1995 Natchez Literary Celebration

The sixth annual Natchez Literary Celebration, June 1-2 1995, adopted the theme "King Cotton: Its Enduring Literary Legacy." Sessions focused on the role of cotton in the historical development of Natchez and on the various ways cotton culture has been reflected in literature. As a preface to the showing of *Richard Wright: Black Boy*, Jerry Ward provided brief remarks on the nature of documentation, the work of Madison Davis Lacy, and the value of the film as a tool for teaching. Among the highlights of the Celebration was the presentation of the second annual Richard Wright Literary Excellence Award to Dr. Margaret Walker Alexander. Other special features were a dramatic lecture by Maya Angelou on "The Value of Ethnic, Economic and Religious Diversity in All Undertakings" and discussions on and a showing of the 1936 classic film *Show Boat*.

The 1996 Natchez Celebration is being held May 30 - June 1 and will explore the fascinating legacy of Southern women in literature, history and culture. Authors appearing will include: Nikki Giovanni, William Styron, Willie Morris, and Myrlie Evers-Williams, wife of the slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers.

American Literature Association Meeting

The sixth annual conference of the American Literature Association (ALA) will be held at the Bahia Hotel in San Diego, May 30-June 2, 1996. Preregistration conference fees will be \$40 (with a special rate of \$10 for independent Scholars, retired individuals, and students). The hotel is offering a conference rate of \$77 a night (single) or \$82 (double). Pre-registration information will be mailed to program participants about two weeks before the general mailing to ALA members.

Those who wish to subscribe to the ALA newsletter and be placed on the ALA database should send a check for \$10 (payable to the American Literature Association) to Alfred Bendixen, Executive Director, ALA, Department of English, California State University, Los Angeles, 5151 State University Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90032.

Annual Richard Wright Circle Open Meeting:

During the ALA Conference, the RWC will hold an open meeting chaired by Jerry Ward. Information about the meeting time and place will be available at the conference registration.

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The editors welcome all news relevant to the life and work of Richard Wright. The *Richard Wright Circle* is supported by the departments of African American Studies and English at Northeastern University

The Color Curtain Revisited: A Review Essay

By YOSHINOBU HAKUTANI
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The Color Curtain, by Richard Wright.

With a foreword by Gunnar Myrdal and an afterword by Amritjit Singh.

Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994. 245 pp.

This nonfiction book is a reprint of Wright's travelogue under the same title, published by the World Publishing Company of Cleveland and New York in 1956, with the exception of the afterword, an extended, informative, and judicious discussion by the literary critic Amritjit Singh. The book opens with a brief introduction by the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, who praises Wright for achieving an impartial vision on "the two powerful urges"—religion and culture—that unite the people of postcolonial Asia. What distinguishes this book, like Wright's other two major nonfiction works, *Black Power* (1954) and *Pagan Spain* (1957), is that Wright had departed from his earlier naturalism and existentialism and that the result is conducive to a post-modern reading. That is, the authorial voice so central to his earlier writing has become here somewhat ancillary. *The Color Curtain* thus thrives on what was found outside the text, such as the relationships among literature, psychology, sociology, religion, politics, and culture.

As its subtitle indicates, *The Color Curtain* constitutes a report on an international and multicultural conference held outside of the West. The narrative structure of the book, however, suggests that Wright's nonfiction work was intended as a travelogue. Unlike a

typical travelogue, which describes a journey from home to elsewhere, Wright's travel begins in Europe and ends in Asia. Living in Paris as an exile, Wright traveled to Madrid by train and then from Madrid to Jakarta by plane with brief stops at Cairo, Karachi, Calcutta, and Bangkok. Much of the initial narrative consists of planned interviews he conducted on the train and plane with a variety of fellow travelers, intellectuals of diverse cultural backgrounds. En route to Bandung, Wright encountered a young, anti-racist Dutch woman; a young Indonesian-born Dutch female journalist; a dark-skinned woman of twenty-six years of age, her mother being an Irish Catholic and her father an Indian of Moslem faith; a middle-aged, married, Westernized, Indonesian, male educator, whom Wright dubs "the H.L. Mencken of Indonesia" (53); a single, restless, Indonesian, male student of political science; a young, male Pakistani journalist educated by Christian missionaries.

What distinguishes *The Color Curtain* from Wright's other books, like *Black Boy* and *Uncle Tom's Children* is the multiculturalism that

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underlies his discourse in it. While Wright's observations and analyses deal with diversity in culture and religion, his overall vision is unified in terms of race. The participants of the Bandung Conference, as a review of the book points out, "found in the very fact of being nonwhite a basis of unity and, in relation to that fact, the events of history and the problems of the present and of the future were discussed." Because Wright in *The Color Curtain* is concerned with cultural diversity as well as with racial unity, his observations at the conference have a direct corollary to the American racial issues he addresses in his other books. The Bandung Conference thus taught Wright that the progress of non-white people in Asia and Africa would be made by the peaceful coex-

istence of diverse cultures and by the scientific and technological assistance the West was to give the East. Such a lesson makes a strong allusion to Wright's observations on American racial issues. The advancement of racially oppressed people in the United States, Wright seems to imply, should be made by mutual respect for the diverse cultural heritages and by the assistance society is obligated to give the educationally and economically disadvantaged.

How closely the problems dis-

cussed in *The Color Curtain* are related to racial and cultural problems in America is suggested by an anecdote Wright includes in the book. During the conference Wright met a white American woman reporter, who intimated to him that her black roommate made a ritual of secretly straightening her hair at night. Puzzled by her roommate's habit, the reporter asked Wright why this black woman felt it necessary to

nonwhite population of the world. To Wright, a cosmetic surgery means a psychological suicide. "That is why," he declares, "twenty-nine nations are meeting her in Bandung to discuss racialism and colonialism the feeling of inferiority that the white man has instilled in these people corrodes their very souls... And though they won't admit it openly, they hate it" (187). The Bandung Conference, in short, was for the descendants of the old cultures to regain their pride and confidence.

The affinity of *The Color Curtain*

and *Black Power*. Interestingly enough, reviews of *The Color Curtain* were more favorable than those of *Black Power* since in *The Color Curtain* Wright appears to take a less anti-colonial and more pro-Western stance. Furthermore, he is decidedly anti-Communist, admonishing the elite of the Third World against sympathizing with World Communism. In the *New York Times Book Review* Tillman Durdin, himself an elite of Indonesia, concurs with Wright's conclusion: the crucial question facing Asians is whether Asia will be dominated by Communism or by democracy. As Wright recognizes in *The Color Curtain* that the emerging nations in Asia were anti-Communist, he observed in *Black Power* that Africa was decidedly anti-colonialist. Realizing that building a new African cultures must be accomplished by building self-confidence, he pleads with Nkrumah "to find your own paths, your own values ... Above all feel free to improvise!" To overcome the "stagnancy of tribalism," African must establish a new social discipline based on pride and confidence. Wright thus maintains: "AFRICAN LIFE MUST BE MILITARIZED." If such a militant tactic is construed as Communist or Fascist, Wright has faith in an African leader like Nkrumah who will not become a dictator. Arming Africa, as Wright says, must be "not for war, but for peace; not for destruction, but for service; not for aggression, but for production; not for despotism, but to free minds from mumbo-jumbo" (*Black Power*).

Wright in *Black Power* argues that the Western influences on Africa in the forms of imperialism and Christian missionaries have all but destroyed once-flourishing civilizations. It is, therefore, understandable that new Africa is anti-colonialist in principle and militaristic in tactic. In *The Color Curtain*, on the other hand, Wright observes that Asian democracy and Communist China were politically at

In his African journey Wright came to realize that the African-American like him is the product of neither Africa nor America but the product of both cultures.

straighten her hair despite the fact that her hair "seems all right." Wright replied: "Because you were born with straight hair, and she wants to look as much like you as possible ..." (185). He hastened to add that the Hindus, who had lived under the British rule for centuries, are conditioned to regard white skins as superior. Such racial inferiority feeling is reminiscent of some young Japanese women who are eager to have a cosmetic surgery performed on the eyelids so that their eyes look just like those of Western women. Referring to the black roommate, Wright responded to the journalist: "Can you blame her? It's a tribute that she pays to the white race. It's her way of saying: 'Forgive me. I'm sorry that I'm black; I'm ashamed that my hair is not like yours. But you see that I'm doing all that I can to be like you ...'" (187).

Such an episode clearly suggests that the center of Wright's interest in *The Color Curtain* lies in generating self-esteem on the part of the

with Wright's other books on race can be seen in *Black Power*, a travelogue based on his journey to the Gold Coast published two years earlier. In *The Color Curtain*, Wright is impressed by the Westernized elite of Asia and Africa, who are able to look at their cultures from both Eastern and Western points of view. In the introductory section of *Black Power*, he describes himself much like a Westernized elite in *The Color Curtain*, a non-white individual who is educated in the West. Such an intellectual has the vantage of being able to see "both worlds from another, the third, point of view." In his African journey Wright came to realize that the African-American like him is the product of neither Africa nor America but the product of both cultures. Just as he urges African-Americans not to return to Africa, he urges the Asian elite not to go back to their religions and cultures. In his eyes, the new Asian leaders play the role of a bridge between the East and the West.

There are some differences in ideology between *The Color Cur-*

war and that the only way in which new Asian cultures can surpass their adversary is through the help of Western science and industry. That he takes an anti-Communist stance in *The Color Curtain* was prophetic, for not only has Communism failed to influence the Third World, but the Soviet Union has collapsed in recent years. It is also prophetic that he regarded the problems of Asia and Africa as "beyond left and right" (*Color Curtain* 9). The Third World, in his view, was confronted with more profound issues like colonialism, racialism, and war or peace—on which both left and right could and did agree.

Between *Black Power* and *The Color Curtain*, both of which comprise Wright's discourse on multiculturalism, emerges a distinct pattern of development in his point of view. The ideas Wright generates in *Black Power*, as his dialogue with Nkrumah suggests, are largely personal. While *Black Power* reads as a psychological, introspective inquiry into the race question, *The Color Curtain* becomes a social, economic, and political projection into the future. Through *The Color Curtain* his observations on multiculturalism in Asian nations lead to his analysis of the race issue at home. Although his view of race and cultures in America is not stated in the book, various analogies he draws between the racial and cultural problems in the Third World and those in America are clearly implied.

The effects of multiculturalism on the Third World thus bear a strong resemblance to those on African-American life. "All intelligent Asians," as an Indonesian educator declares, "now know that the Western white man is praying for us to fight among ourselves,

and that we'll never do." In his view, Western people, admitting that colonialism had failed, were attempting to reconquer that world by dividing the people of the Third World. "Fighting among ourselves," he says, "is the white man's only chance of getting back. We're closing ranks. The white man will be disappointed" (*Color Curtain* 67). Solidarity among the oppressed, particularly among

In [Wright's] view, Western people, admitting that colonialism had failed, were attempting to reconquer that world by dividing the people of the Third World.

black people, is the most powerful weapon against racism as Wright shows in "Fire and Cloud" that the Reverend Taylor succeeds in uniting his congregation. With the stoicism and endurance buttressed by his racial and religious consciousness, Taylor succeeds in leading the poor and the oppressed to freedom.

Another affinity between colonialism in the Third World and racism in America can be seen in the appeal Marxism had to non-white people. "I agree with Nehru," a Pakistani journalist maintained. "Colonialism and not Communism is the main danger. Get rid of colonies and you'll not have a trend toward Communism." Reminding Wright that Russia was a colonial state when she became the Soviet Union, a Marxist state, he argued that the American fear of World Communism is "shortsighted and unhistorical."

To Wright, freedom for black people can become a reality only when all black people acquire independent visions as outsiders. No matter how courageous Silas, a prosperous black farmer in

"Long Black Song," may appear, his fight against the racial oppressors makes little impact on the black liberation as a whole because his rebellion is motivated by a private matter. The emancipation from the rural South, Wright warns, must be accompanied by the vision of the outsider. "Negroes, as they encounter our cultures," Ely Houston, New York District Attorney in *The Outsider* speaks as Wright's mouthpiece, "are going to inherit the problems we have, but with a difference... they are going to be self-conscious; they are going to be gifted with a double vision, for, being Negroes, they are going to be both *inside* and *outside* of our culture at the same time."

This achievement of independent vision, which Wright considers an imperative duty for African-Americans, is also what characterizes the new Asians and Africans. Wright thus found at the Bandung Conference that not only were the harbingers of the Third World well educated in Western cultures and philosophy but they were proud of their history and tradition. He indeed envisioned "the Westernized and tragic elite of Asia, Africa, and the West Indies" as "men who carry on their frail but indefatigable shoulders the best of two worlds" (*White Man, Listen!*). Their double vision is what enables them to acquire the basic ideas of democracy and freedom from the West but reject the inhuman aspects of capitalism: greed and materialism. Buttressed by the spirit of their tradition, they are able to sustain some of the fundamental values of humanism: peace, loyalty, love, and kinship. Such an extolment of their qualities also speaks well of the liberated black people Wright envisioned in America.

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Reading Richard Wright: Students Respond

Bigger and Me

By ROBERTA PHILLIPS

GRADE 11

Bigger Thomas was a black male in the 1940s. He did not have a father. His family, which consisted of his brother, sister and mother, was stricken with poverty. Bigger did not know if there was going to be food on the table the following day. A rat-infested, one-room apartment in the "Black Belt" is what Bigger called home. His family slept in two small beds, the women in one and the men in the other. Like many other black men then, Bigger lacked a proper education. During this time, the degradation of the black man was very much a reality. Lack of education and of opportunity left blacks in a desperate situation.

Bigger had few resources. He did not have a role model to take him by the hand and show him the way to a better life, an education, or a job. Bigger did not know of any centers of organizations that could educate him about politics or the world that we live in. Politicians and other black leaders like them were not real to Bigger. If there were people and/or organizations that Bigger could draw from, he had no idea that they existed or where to find them. The society that Bigger lived in kept him ignorant and confined.

This world did not go beyond Bigger's restricted reality.

"The white neighbor decided to limit the amount of education his black neighbor could receive; decided to keep him off the police force and out of the local national guards; to segregate him residentially; to Jim Crow him in public places; to restrict his participation in the professions and jobs; and to build up vast, dense ideology of racial superiority that would justify any act of violence taken against him to defend white dominance; and further, to condition him to hope for little

and to receive little without rebelling" (511).

This restricted reality was not in Bigger's imagination. He was caught in a cycle of abuse by white society, restricted in some of the most basic areas of life like education and work. Society willingly kept Bigger and hundreds, even thousands, like him in the dark just so they could maintain an unearned dominance in society. The times that Bigger was living in were cruel. Racism and prejudice were very obvious. I, however, have a different situation.

I am a young black woman living in the 1990s. I have three sisters and two brothers. Four of my siblings have moved out on their own. My mother, father, younger sister and I live in a

seven room apartment. I have my own room, and I do not have to worry about food being on the table; that is a given. I take for granted the stereo and computer systems in my room, the heat I get in the winter and the air conditioning in the summer. Every morning, I wake up to another day of school, not just any school, but Noble and Greenough, a celebrated private school in Dedham, MA. ~~There are no Jim Crow laws. I am able to drink from the same fountain as everyone else.~~ I can sit where I want on the bus. The neighborhood that I live in is represented by a lot of different cultures: Asians, Blacks, Caucasians, Hispanics etc. More freedom for people of different races to get an education makes it possible for there to be more professional blacks, (still not nearly enough). I have tools to help me.

Resources for me to utilize are present. There are many professionals that I know, Black, White, Hispanic, and Oriental. Many programs in Boston are dedicated to getting young

persons jobs or getting them into school. Channels for Education is especially dedicated to helping students of color get into private institutions for education. This is the organization that helped me get into Nobles. I can go to my school counselor for help or advice. Even the local library is packed full with information that can be helpful to me. Even though I have all these resources, I am still restricted.

The color of my skin restricts me. Yes, progress has been made from the 1940s to the 1990s, but that progress is relatively small. Blacks legally and

theoretically have the same legal rights as whites do. But society is still plagued by ignorance. This ignorance is the reason I am restricted, almost in a sense punished, for not being white. Preconceived notions and ideas and the desire by white men to stay in power feeds this

Bigger's oppression was overt. My oppression is covert. We both have to deal with being black in America.

ignorance. This ignorance covers space and time. This ignorance is not only happening today. It was happening in the 1940s, all the years in between then and now and before then.

Bigger and I have the same kinds of issues but they appear in different ways. Bigger's oppression was overt. My oppression is covert. We both have to deal with being black in America. ~~We both are in powerful environments where whites are in power. But where Bigger is made to sit in "black only" sections, living in the black part of town, and called "boy" or even being referred to as subhuman, I have to hear ignorant comments about black people, feel like my voice falls on deaf ears, and listen to people call me "Kai," another black student in school.~~

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In the beginning of the book, Bigger was "trapped." He was not only trapped physically, with the Jim Crow laws and the "Black Belt," but he was

trapped emotionally. "He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair" (9). The conditions of his life were so bad that he bottled up his feelings so that he would not feel the pain of his life. That moment of realization would make his life unbearable. This is because Bigger had no outlet, "... better to fight Gus ... than to confront a white man with a gun" (47), one of the alternatives that were available to him, violence. The other that Bigger used was sex. "She wanted liquor and he wanted her." Bessie used the outlet of liquor and Bigger used Bessie. Bigger's environment left him short of choices, another side effect of being trapped. "I felt and still feel that the environment supplies the instrumentalities through which the organism expresses itself, and if that environment is warped or tranquil, the mode and manner of behavior will be affected toward deadlocking tensions or orderly fulfillment and satisfaction" (516). Richard Wright points out that the environment has different ways in which it allows people to express themselves and depending on the environment and what the person chooses to do, it can be fruitful or not. The person works with what the environment provides.

I was also "trapped" my first year at Nobles. I was "trapped" by my ignorance and lack of experience with racial problems. I knew racism was out there. But I had never experienced it. For instance, my Freshman year at Nobles, I was part of a cast that was made up of all students of color. It was a black play. Yet, white students at Nobles made a big deal about the cast being of color. Their argument was that the quality of the play was sacrificed because the director limited himself to the students of color. That implies that students of color do not have the talent that whites have. Does being of color equal no talent? Of course it does not. The white student body was afraid of losing their power. They were afraid of being on equal footing with students of color. They told me that I was only picked for the part because I was black, not because I deserved it. "How can they say that," I said to myself. I did not know what to

do, so I cried. As a matter of fact, I was crying every other night. I finally realized I was different. The worst part was that I could not change it. Not that I wanted to. But if people make fun of your shirt, then you have the option to not wear the shirt. But when people judge you by your skin you cannot change the color of your skin. What hurt me even more was that they did not know me. I was a new student and no one had taken the time to say, "Hey wait a minute, we have never seen her act, maybe she is good." What was my outlet? I did not do anything for a while. But one day I could not keep it inside of me any longer so I got up on stage in assembly with a friend and told everyone in the auditorium how I felt. I used by voice, my thoughts and feelings as an outlet.

Bigger used violence as an outlet. He killed Mary Dalton, a white

My outlet was to educate the community. In doing this, I did not have to wear the mask that Bigger did. I did not have to play stupid. ... I used knowledge.

woman. Bigger lashed out at what was in his way, white people, even though Mary was trying to be nice to Bigger. She was insensitive and ignorant to his feelings. She treated him like a sick puppy, instead of a person. "When I see what they've done to those people, it makes me so mad. ... Say, Jan, do you know many Negroes? I want to meet some" (88). Mary relieves herself of the blame and puts it on other people. The plight of the black man is not a social opportunity. Nothing is sacred to some white people, like when they say "their" music is so wonderful and then they start singing a spiritual. That is totally disrespectful. The music has so much more meaning than they can understand. If they did, they would not try to sing it. Mary was trespassing. Bigger released all of his anger in the act of murder. Bigger committed the ultimate crime for a

black man at the time: he killed a white woman. He had done what he was not supposed to be capable of. Not because he was physically incapable of it, but because of the way white society wanted black men to fear them. If Bigger could kill a white woman then others could and would. If the white man could not protect his woman, then maybe he would not be able to protect his business and land and all of his institutions, including the government. Bigger did not draw out the act of the murder to this extent but he fully knew that he had done something out of his "realm" and that gave him satisfaction. "The knowledge that he had killed a white girl they loved and regarded as their symbol of beauty made him feel the equal of them, like a man who had been somehow cheated, but now evened the score." Bigger had gotten some revenge on white people. The fact that he had destroyed one of their symbols made him feel equal to them. If he was equal to them that meant that he had choices and could do what he wanted. The best part was that they were too ignorant to even suspect that a black man could commit such a crime. "The mere thought that these avenues were open to him made him feel free, that his life was his, that he held his future in his hands. But they would never think that he had done it; not a meek black boy like him." Bigger had choices now. It is sad that a murder gave Bigger the sense of life. In Bigger's mind, he was free. But it was a false freedom. He still had to play dumb. He still had to sit in the "black sections." He was only free within himself. Only he knew what he had done. I let everyone know how I felt.

My outlet was to educate the community. In doing this, I did not have to wear the mask that Bigger did. I did not have to play stupid. In fact, it was the exact opposite. For me to play stupid would have been detrimental to me. So I used knowledge. I wrote poems, articles, and started a singing group. One of the poems I wrote spoke to the need of education and helping those in the community. It is called "My People":

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I will help you.

I care.

I know your pain and your fears.
I've been prejudged, misjudged,
and all because of the color of my
skin.

I know what it's like to be born
unequal
and sadly you do, too.

The shades of our skin makes no
difference,

it all means ignorance, to the ig-
norant.

Or nigger as some say to my
niggaz.

To them we are filling a quota.
Let them think that. In the mean-
time, arm yourselves.

Leave no part of your body un-
protected.

Then help your brother and your
sister and cuz next door to
get theirs together.

And when you hear the battle
cry, all must know that

My people overcame with the
power the comes from knowl-
edge.

I wrote this poem in response to a poem that one of my fellow students of color wrote. I recited this poem in assembly, hoping that someone would hear what I was trying to say. It was for my people first and foremost, but others could get something out of it, too. They could maybe understand that we are judged by our skin, and that those who do that are ignorant. There is a need for education for everyone, especially the oppressed in this society. If we are not knowledgeable about what is going on in society then how can we begin to change it?

The article I wrote was in response to an article in the *Nobleman* about the rejection by the school of the Black Chorus. The Black Chorus is a group I tried to start at Nobles. As the name implies, it was a chorus for black students to meet on common grounds to strengthen themselves and educate the community through music that was begun and performed by people who looked like them. A *Nobleman* article labeled my effort as a kind of exclusive movement and further tried to deny its credibility by making it seem like students of color were trying to

get back at the school for the denial of two black students of Greensleeves. I stated in my article some of the exclusivity at Nobles such as different organizations, at that time including Greensleeves and the *Nobleman* staff. It also stated that I had no intention of trying to cause any tension in the school. I was trying to bring the community together by giving silenced students of color a voice. What was birthed out of this controversy was Amani, a group dedicated to celebrat-

submissive like he was "supposed" to, maybe the whole situation would not have been so bad. In the beginning, Bigger did not let his feelings out. He did not have any hope. If there was no hope he could take everything that was given to him as normal. With his hope, when the walls finally did come down, they came down harder, because it did not have to be that way, and he knew that. He knew that he might not have had to die.

Hope is all I have. There are no

There is a need for education for everyone, especially the oppressed in this society. If we are not knowledgeable about what is going on in society then how can we begin to change it?

ing the voice of the black artist. Students of all colors could join.

Even though my outlet was stifled, I found a place. I still did not accomplish what I set out to do, which was create a group for black students at Nobles. My environment limited me, but something good did come out of it. I had found my voice. Almost everyone knew my name and who I was. I started to become comfortable with the school. I knew what it was about. I was no longer shocked or confused by people's behavior. I knew how to deal with people. Fighting every battle was not necessary. Learning to let things slide was very helpful. "Choose your battles wisely" became my motto. What became of Bigger?

Bigger got caught in a death trap. Bigger would pay for his crime. He would pay for taking Mary's life with his own. White society would not let him get away with stepping across their boundaries. They would make an example of him. Max told Bigger right before the trial, "... every Negro in America is on trial out there today" (426). All of the newspaper articles, all the speculation, the other murders that Buckley tried to accuse Bigger of, is what they saw black people doing. It does not matter if he did not do it personally, because black people were seen as one. So Bigger was going to pay with his life for whatever they thought he should.

If Bigger had not thought that he could fool the "white man," and stayed

guarantees that anything I do will save my life. I do not just mean physically saving my life. I will not have a life if I am not able to live, as I see fit. If I can not do what I want, then I am dead. I try my best to let people know what is going on. Maybe one day they will see.

All black people are going through a struggle, being black. It is a struggle to wake up everyday and know that you are being judged by the color of your skin. You know the situation is sad when you are not surprised by racist or ignorant comments made by peers and teachers. You feel insulted when standards are lowered for you simply because people do not think you can excel like everyone else just because you are black. What do you tell a child who comes home crying because someone has called him a "nigger"? No black person in the world can escape the color of his or her skin, no matter the time or place. The only thing that we can control (to some extent) is the way we deal with and evolve from the situation.

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Redemption With, Redemption Without

By BEN KEYES
GRADE 12

It's the time of year when for a week I don't see the full light of day at home. The sun is just beginning to come up when I slam the back door of the Taurus and settle into the cold, crumb-covered seat, my right hand clattering through the pile of coverless tapes and tapeless covers. It's a pile that hides no new pleasant surprises, but that gets its daily turning over without fail. I'm searching for the perfect tape, the perfect tape for the morning, for a unique thing about the morning that would warrant a special tape, something subtly different from every other morning. The carpool snoozes.

My mind is on a different road than the car, and only leaps back when my eyes sense the two red lights of the car ahead creeping slowly apart. The sleeping carpool leans gently forward and back, and my mind slips off the road again to unconnected thoughts of what I am driving to: Louis XIV, Bigger, defining form, the central nervous system. Then there is the laboriousness of small talk, the anxiety of food and friends, and young cocky cynicism. My mind has two halves, each alive only at its given place, and pathetically starved at the other. Here on the road between, they are in the bumpy process of switching.

I wonder whether God exists at school, or what I know at home applies when I step out of the car in the fast-filling parking lot. *To* and *from* are two fast skis, one on each foot, speeding along two gradually splitting paths until I have to throw my full weight onto one. Then I wonder the two can be brought together, or whether the skis will split me down the middle, or maybe speed on to the right and left of an immovable tree trunk. Or maybe I'm just already split and I'm too confused to know it.

I settle back into the cold crumb-covered seat after a day of appeasing immediacy and feel stretched thin. I don't bother with the tapes until well into the drive, and then only to keep me from dozing. I know that there was nothing so special about the day that

deserved any one of them.

A person's concept of redemption depends on what they value the most, what they believe is real and imaginary, relevant and irrelevant, and what they think they need saving from. These can all be profoundly shaped by the world around a person that bombards them with what is considered important. But is each person's redemption as valid as another's? Is it arrogant to suggest that what some people put their faith in will actually save them, and what others put their faith in will not?

For Bigger Thomas, redemption was a distant and ill-defined hope that could only be reached through a slow and arduous process, with many confusing barriers and false trails. I think he was vulnerable to being misled along these trails and intimidated by the obstacles because of his world that continually denied

him tangible hope. His dreams and ambitions became more laughable as he grew older, and because of this, trivial and twisted goals took on a greater importance, to the point of feeling redemptive to him.

He was taught by the whites of Chicago that he was worthless and he was reminded of it by the constant pestering of his own family. He existed in a shifting state of fear, frustration, indifference, and rage, that felt as if it was carrying him steadily to disaster.

So, did Bigger find redemption before he died? Whether you say yes or no depends entirely on your definition of redemption. In *Native Son*, Richard Wright does not say directly what he considers to be redemptive for Bigger. There is a needed distinction between what made Bigger *feel* redeemed and what Wright intended to be redemptive. Bigger had a self-inflated sense of fulfillment, a per-

verse feeling of power both from taking Mary's life, and by keeping a secret that no one thought his Negro mind was capable of. It was what his restlessness, frustration, fear and hate led him to seek, and what he attempted to find when he planned to rob the white man's store. His actions seemed to be more of a release through violence than a redemption, and the release tragically made him feel good.

"It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time

in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him. ... His crime was an anchor weighing him safely in time; it added to him a certain confidence which his gun and his knife did not" (119).

"Now who on earth would think that he, a black timid Negro boy, would murder and burn a rich white girl and would sit and wait for breakfast like this? Elation filled him" (120).

I am wondering how much subjugation a person can take before a realization of the need for grace becomes too self-degrading to bear. Submitting to God might have made [Bigger] feel robbed of his already limited power.

This feeling of power and secret knowledge suggests to me that Bigger did not believe in God. If he believed, there would have been someone who knew even more about his crime than he did. Could the white world have killed his faith by making it too difficult for him to be subordinate to another force? His life was already such an inferior existence, how could he have fallen prostrate to another superior force that was even less tangible than the first? I am wondering how much subjugation a person can take before a realization of the need for grace becomes too self-degrading to bear. Submitting to God might have made him feel robbed of his already limited power.

Can a person only take so much comfort before God seems irrelevant to them? In my world, everything is trivialized because of the relative freedom from suffering that surrounds me. Isn't it easy to be blinded from

seeing the need for God's grace? It is what I drive to every day, the ski that I feel the need to jump off of. I fight to keep my mind clear of the notion that I am in control of my life, that everything is fine as long as I do everything well enough. Bigger also fell farther from believing in God when he thought he could redeem himself. Therefore, shouldn't the strength from knowing God's grace come more easily with weakness? The Reverend Hammond said, "Thank Gawd tha' He done chose this way fer yuh t' come t' 'im" (329). I think that Hammond believed that Bigger would recognize God as his only hope in his state of total despair.

Bigger rejected Christianity because he lacked the most vital ingredient; a belief that it was actually true, that God existed as surely as Bigger himself did, and that a repentance toward him would hold a real and tangible benefit. Without a belief that God existed, the words of the Reverend Hammond could only be meaningless words of comfort, or nostalgic sounds from his childhood. Bigger had killed his ability to believe in God long before Hammond spoke to him. It was too difficult for him to reproduce a belief in such a profoundly different dimension to reality.

The Reverend Hammond might have done everything possible to convince Bigger to come to God. Bigger's mind might have been too closed for anything to penetrate it, but was there something missing in the way Hammond spoke of God? When Jan and Hammond were in Bigger's cell, and Jan first offered the legal help of his friend Max, Hammond's response was, "Ah respects yo' feelin's powerfully, suh; but whut yuh's astin' jus' stirs up mo' hate. What this po' boy needs is understandin'..." Hammond knew what white hate was far better than Jan did, and he knew what happened when his people tried to resist it, so maybe he was right in his reluctance to fight injustice, but I cannot help feeling that Bigger would have been more drawn to Christianity had Hammond taken seriously the guilt of the white people in Chicago.

This was a short-coming of Hammond that I think ignored a vital aspect of the history of African Ameri-

can Christianity. It was the very thing that helped give black Christians the strength to live on through the most brutal oppression.

"I couldn't find a mule"

Lord, I worked old Maude this morning, god knows I done worked old Belle.

Oh, I worked old Maude, captain, you know I done worked old Belle.

I couldn't find a mule in the whole corral, Lord, that had its shoulder well.

I been kind of worried, I been thinkin' 'bout what's been goin' on.

You know I been kind of worried, Lord, I been had by travelin' shoes on.

I seed the captain whip on the water boy, and durn near bust his head.

Uumh, oh Lord, oh Lord, oh Lord, oh Lord, oh Lord, oh Lord, oh Lord.

An' I thought about what my mother and Father said, it's never too late to pray.

You know I told the captain that my mother was dead.

Oh I told the bossman early this morning, Lord, that my poor mother was dead.

He said, Negro, If you don't go to work, you soon will be dead too.

Here's what I said,

Uumh, Lord have mercy on my poor sinkin' soul

Uumh - have mercy on a poor man's sinkin' soul.

The devil's got the badge of that white man

It's too late for him to try to pray.

These are the lyrics to a song written by the late blues singer and piano player Sunnyland Slim, who was a contemporary of Richard Wright's in Chicago. In this song, Slim was not simply crying out to God out of suffering. He was not asking God to have mercy on *him* when he sang, "The devil's got the badge of that white man, it's too late for him to try to pray." Sunnyland Slim was living un-

der similar conditions as Bigger, but redemption to him through Christianity provided a set of rules by which his oppressors would be judged. I think that this idea was foreign to Bigger.

It was not enough for him to know that there was a beautiful paradise waiting for *him* if he would only pray to God. Equally as important was the knowledge that there was a final and totally just punishment waiting for

But it seemed that Bigger saw the religion of Reverend Hammond as being for the weak; for people who lacked the vitality to stand on their own or who were willing to get pushed around by God as well as by other men.

Buckley, and for the millions of other people acting from prejudice-driven hate.

"Christianity was a spiritual resistance that accepted the limits of the politically possible" (Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 254).

"Christianity offered to the oppressed and the despised the image of God crucified by power, greed and malice and yet in the end resurrected, triumphant, and redeeming the faithful. However much Christianity taught submission to slavery, it also carried a message of foreboding to the master class and of resistance to the enslaved (Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 165).

But it seemed that Bigger saw the religion of Reverend Hammond as being for the weak; for people who lacked the vitality to stand on their own or who were willing to get pushed around by God as well as by other men. He always felt a need for something else;

something that religion seemed only an easy substitute for, or an escape from.

"He saw and felt but one life, and that one life was more than a sleep, a dream; life was all life had. ... The life was short, and his sense of it goaded him. He was seized with a nervous eagerness. He stood in the middle of the floor and tried to see himself in relation to other men ..." (418). He wanted desperately to tell people what he had felt, what drove him to commit murder. He wanted to come to an understanding of himself and his life and to express it to anyone. The redemption that he longed for was an inner peace, a sense of worth, anything to hold onto to make death bearable, to make it lose some of its stinging, mocking finality. To die not having spoken the truth about himself would be to give fear, confusion and hate the last and defining grip on his life. He is crying out for a strong and lasting redemption!

"It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something. ... I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em ... I feel alright when I look at it that way" (501). This was from his last conversation with Max, and it seems that he satisfied his longing to understand himself. Max was the only person who would listen to him and so the only hope for this redemption was through Max's compassion. It was Max's questions and at times his merely existing in the cell that gave Bigger the courage and the strength to speak.

But I wonder whether this redemption was too shallow. It was not an insignificant and ungodly desire of Bigger's to die in peace, but whatever peace he reached in his last hours of life would not last. It was his goal to sweep the last remnants of life and worth together, but he would unavoidably lose it all in death. It was important that he came to this peace but it needed something else to give it meaning, otherwise it would be merely a last little quest for comfort.

The redemption that I think Richard Wright intended Bigger to reach is too narrow. It borrows from a deeper and more lasting Christian redemption but constricts the word to what

can be accomplished in this life. And all along, what Bigger really longed for, although he did not realize it, was a reunion with God; finding his story, himself in relation to other men, and his peace all in God. His life and God were on two different roads, and I do not think Wright brought them together again.



Crow Nation: The Black Belt of Pryor

By HANNAH GARDNER
GRADE 12

I stand under the pelting rays of the Crow Nations's sun. Separating the leaves of the Sun Dance arbor, I peek inside at the multicolored dancers. The beat of the drum reverberates through my body. They say it is the rhythm of my mother's heartbeat. Is this really the same heartbeat as my mother's?

The black skin of the dancers is masked by the stripes of their ancestors. Their bodies are draped in leather, feathers, bright cloth. The white ribs that shield their chests rattle as they walk. The whistles of their breaths cry out in desperation. "God help us. Only you can help us."

Their chanting is continuous, repetitive. It overwhelms my senses as they approach my hiding spot. They pray to the head on the center pole, staring reverently, heads high, repeating the words of their parents, of their children. Their words resound in one. They stumble in the face of God. They feel God. They hear God. He is holding them high. Their feet raise their shaking bodies to the beat of the drum, to their heartbeat, to my heartbeat.

The black pupils of a woman draped in yellow cloth pierce mine. I lower my eyes and pull my head out of the crack in the trees. I stand back and listen. I hesitate before peering into

the lighted arbor again. Did the woman see me watching her? Was I intruding? What does she think of my white face, my blue eyes interpreting her world? Does she fear? Should I fear?

I turn to watch the Crow men seated around the trailer cars in the distant rear. While the dancers are drunk with faith and hope, these men consume themselves with alcohol. They sit slumped in their chairs, waving away the children dancing around them. They stare vacantly at the sun dance arbor, shielded by the plastic tarp canopy designating their property. Do they hear the chanting? Do they hear the beat of the drum? Surely they can not hear my mother's heartbeat.

I remain focused on the drinking men, their eyes glazed. They are easier to observe. They fit the stereotypes. They are doing what we want the Crow to do. They drink. They abuse. They are miserable. They have no pride. They have no dreams. They consume their sorrow in their alcohol. I watch them in disgust. How easy they are to hate.

I turn back to the dancing images. They move with purpose. They speak from their hearts. They face their God with faith and with hope. Stumbling from exhaustion, they believe in their prayers, united. I watch their bodies, not their faces. I remain inconspicuous. I do not want them to see me, to see my shame, to see my guilt. I bear the face of terror, of persecution, of denial, of power. My white face glares in the sunlight. Have I hurt them? Better yet, have I believed, believed in them, in their power? I know I have not. I cannot

I remain focused on the drinking men, their eyes glazed. They are easier to observe. They fit the stereotypes. They are doing what we want the Crow to do.

look.

They stop dancing, ready to make sacrifices to their God and offer public prayers. "Bill Clinton." I turn my head towards the speaker. "May we offer this prayer to our devout President." I feel ashamed, angry. How can they pray for President Clinton? How can they pray for a man who symbolizes the government that has persecuted them, has denied them, has handed them the alcohol? How can they believe in a man who himself has not

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believed, has not loved? How can they pray for him? I want them to hate him, to speak out against him. I look away, ashamed. Are they praying for me? Have I prayed for them? I want them to hate me, to tell me to leave. No. They pray for me. They say they love me. They say they will always love me. I feel shame.

I look at the red and white stripes flying over the entrance to the arbor. These are not the stars that the Crow wish upon. These stars have never granted the wishes of this starving nation. These people have been abandoned, abused. We have abandoned them, we have abused them. They fly our flag, their flag.

I become angry for them, with them, at them. How can they dance and sing and pray and unite under this face of adversity? They pull my friend, Maggie, into their circle. They purify her with their sacred feather, they pray for her health, our health. They thank her. Why?

The bright colors of their clothing form a rainbow around Maggie, a rainbow of pride, of faith, of acceptance. They have accepted themselves, and they have accepted Maggie. Now Maggie *must* accept them, love them. For the Crow will conquer. The Crow surround Maggie in song and prayer. She looks scared, confused, overwhelmed.

I look back at the drinking men. They face their bottles, scared. Where are their futures? They try to find the answers in their alcohol. They see no God on this hill top. Only their bottles. They don't see their fellow Crow, dancing, and they don't hear the drum, their heart beat. But I am equally scared, scared of my power, my responsibility, my ancestors. We are equally guilty. Equally destructive.

Their prayers for President Clinton are finally absorbed in my mind. "We will love him. We will pray for him. He is our President. May he conquer."

Has he conquered? Has he conquered the Crow? Have his fathers conquered the Crow? Are the Crow now victorious? Today, they are dancing, they are singing, their heartbeat reverberates through all, through the mountains upon which we stand and the valleys below. The Crow are united. They have accepted. They have loved. They struggle and they survive.

Well, not all. I focus my attention back on the periphery of the arbor; the drinking men look at me. I can hold my head high. I can feel proud. My

The whites found it easier to focus on Bigger's criminal actions than on the behavior of blacks who were struggling to fulfill their dreams, educate themselves, and find purpose in their lives. Black criminal activity made the whites more comfortable with themselves, with their hate, and with their guilt. Likewise, I found it easier to focus on the men drinking around the sun dance arbor than on the dancers inside.

guilt may be allayed. Have these men held the Crow back or have I? I do not want to know. It is easier to assume, to blame, to hold your chin high. I can. The power of my ancestors has allowed me to conquer. But have I? Only if I think I have? No.

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In *Native Son*, Max considered Mary's murder, suggesting that "Maybe we [whites] *wanted* him [Bigger] to do it! Maybe we would have had no chance or justification to stage attacks against hundreds of thousands of people if he had acted sanely and normally!" (460).

The whites of Chicago subconsciously preferred that the blacks of the Black Belt commit crimes rather than enhance their lives through education and service. When blacks murdered, robbed, and refused to work, the whites felt justified in their prejudice against blacks. The whites wanted to feel legitimately less responsible than the black criminals for the destruction of the black community.

James Baldwin echoed Max's argu-

ment in "Down at the Cross." He underscored Max's suggestion that whites promoted black criminal behavior to justify white superiority. "Negro servants have been smuggling odds and ends out of white homes for generations, and white people have been delighted to have them do it, because it has assuaged a dim guilt and testified to the intrinsic superiority of white people" (*The Fire Next Time*, 22).

Max argued that it is human nature to blame others for one's own wrongdoing in order to alleviate guilt. "Of all things, men do not like to feel that they are guilty of wrong, and if you make them feel guilt, they will try desperately to justify it on any grounds; but, failing that, and seeing no immediate solution that will set things right without too much cost to their lives and property,

they will kill that which evoked in them the condemning sense of guilt. And this is true of all men, whether they be white or black; it is a peculiar and powerful, but common, need" (453). Whites instinctively focused on that which they deplored in the black community in order to find good cause for racial segregation and suppression. Max recognized the human tendency to simply destroy that which causes such feelings of guilt.

The whites found it easier to focus on Bigger's criminal actions than on the behavior of blacks who were struggling to fulfill their dreams, educate themselves, and find purpose in their lives. Black criminal activity made the whites more comfortable with themselves, with their hate, and with their guilt. Likewise, I found it easier to focus on the men drinking around the sun dance arbor than on the dancers inside. The men symbolized the primary reason inside the Crow community for their weakness and failure: alcohol and illicit substance abuse. I represented the outside force even more responsible for their near demise: persecution by the white world.

In order to hold my head high at the sun dance ceremony, I needed to suppress my own guilt. I accomplished this with hatred. Hatred of the men drinking around the arbor. I too fell prey to the natural tendencies that Max described. Instead of focusing on the powerful Crow dancers, I turned to the Biggers of the Crow tribe, those who felt defeated, rejected. They were easier to observe. They hated me and I hated them. They did not appreciate the playground I was building for their children. No. And why should they? I

The Crow had conquered my ignorance with their love. They had the power, strength, and pride to forgive, to accept, and to love. Not to forget.

didn't know.

While my guilt was ironically allayed by observing these alcoholics, my guilt was enhanced by watching the dancers, proud, energetic, strong, and hopeful. They had risen above adversity. And how? By loving that which had tortured them. The white man. They loved me. They accepted me whether or not I accepted them. They offered prayers for me during their sacred ritual. They invited me to participate in their tradition. Why? Because I was the one with the true misfortune. I was paralyzed by ignorance, by stereotypes, trapped in history, in a need to forgive. I held the power of change, yet I had not recognized the power of change itself. I could only see the drinking Crow. They were the Crow tribe in my mind. I needed to see the dancers, to recognize their strength. I was the one who needed to change, to open my eyes, and to acknowledge what I saw. I could no longer see that which history told me to see: alcohol.

The Crow had conquered my ignorance with their love. They had the

power, strength, and pride to forgive, to accept, and to love. Not to forget.

James Baldwin implored his nephew to conquer racism with acceptance of whites. He wrote, "The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope" (*The Fire Next Time* 8).

The Crow dancers had applied this response to racism in their acceptance of me and my friends. A Crow leader told me. "I will love you, no matter if you love me or not." And I loved him. His love created mine. He had conquered. He had the power to love and accept. And so did I.



Sweat Lodge

By HANNAH GARDNER
GRADE 12

I am naked. I am nervous. The summer heat blankets my pale white body, ghostlike compared to the blackened skin of those around me. Not knowing where to place my eyes, I gaze above me. I am in Big Sky country. And the sky is big. The light from the stars glitter through the passing clouds. I hope the dark air hides my fear, my ignorance. I wrap my arms around my chest. I am so white. So white.

The Crow women are busy. They are preparing the sweat lodge for our intrusion. They fill the hole in the center of the dome with scorching rocks. The heat already stains my skin. How hot will I become? Am I really able to endure such temperatures? I can feel my hastened heartbeat in my temples. Will this be too hard? Will I be too uncomfortable? I can still decline. No one is forcing me to endure this physical sacrifice. Unlike the Crow, my endurance is optional. I have not been persecuted and robbed.

I am here, in Crow country, to make things better. To build a playground for the Crow children. To recognize the spiritual power and the tradition of the Crow tribe. To witness their faith and rejoice in their survival. To show them that America has changed. We no longer discriminate against Indians, deny them opportunity, and

confine them to nothing. We have changed. We are ready to help, to build their nation again, in our nation. According to our rules? Don't you see? We are ready to build playgrounds for their children. Won't that be great? Won't that make them happy? We want them to be happy. Then we will be happy. The children will have a refuge from their drunken fathers and cursing mothers. We will solve the problem. Simple.

I smile at the Crow women. I am here to embrace them. Under their big sky, I come to settle differences, century-old difference. Of hate, fear, oppression, power, abuse, and ignorance. We have hated. We have feared. We have oppressed. We have abused our power. And we have been ignorant. But we have changed. Now we are building playgrounds, sweating with the Crow, for the Crow.

I sit, blinded by the darkness, naked in the scorching dome of sweat. The fuzz of sage brush pierces my limbs, as my white skin melts into the black wrinkles of my Crow neighbor. In silence, we let the sweat seep out of

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our bodies. I lick my lips and taste the bitterness of the moisture coating my face. The bitterness of my body liquids escapes with that of my heart. They say I am emotionally purified. I that what I am here to prove? Will my playground prove that? or simply my presence? or neither?

The dirt of the earth sticks to my damp skin as I turn to press my mouth

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against the edge of the ledge. I gasp for air in the crack between the dirt and the wool of the dome coverings. Can I survive this ritual? With every pouring of water over the coals, suffocating steam floods my wind pipes.

I look to either side of me and I see nothing. The darkness blinds us completely. Am I still white in this darkness? Or are we all the same color - nothing? Can that ever be the case? Will we ever be color-blind? Is that

Am I still white in this darkness? Or are we all the same color - nothing? Can that ever be the case? Will we ever be color-blind? Is that what I am here to prove? By building a playground? Am I really that foolish?

what I am here to prove? By building a playground? Am I really that foolish?

The sweat leader begins to tell stories, mythical stories of the creation of the Crow nation. I listen to the names of Crow leaders, Crow heroes. Just like me, they have sat in identical domes of heat, of sweat, and they have purified themselves. And in such a dome of darkness, they have looked just like me. Our bodies, naked of clothing and accessories, have released their bitterness. Though centuries apart, I feel connected to the tradition of men and women who have sweated before me. What would they think of that? What would they think of a white girl sweating in one of their lodges? Of building a playground for their children? Shouldn't they love that? I do not know.

We are told to consume our thoughts in prayer and thanks. I pray for my cousin dying of cancer. Again and again, I pray for him. And I pray for everyone dying of cancer. And AIDS. And I pray for my family, for their safety and good health. And I pray for myself, for my health, my success. I pray that I get accepted to college. That I have a successful senior year in high school. I am thankful for everything, my health, my safety, my love, my security, my wealth, my in-

telligence, my advantage.

I look over at my neighbor. Blinded, I see myself in her. But our thoughts are of different colors, our prayers of different races, our thanks of different nations, and our dreams of different worlds. She prays for the Crow nation, for its unity, for its strength, and for its growth. She prays for a plentiful harvest, for her health and that of her family. I do not know what she is thankful for. Surely not the playgrounds. I know that.

How can I mend the differences

when they are so deep? As deep as prayers and dreams. Will we ever be able to be color-blind in our hearts and our minds? I do not know.

The sweat leader says we have just completed our last pour of water and we are ready to take a break outside, to drink water and dip ourselves in the creek beside the lodge. Exiting the steamy lodge, we wrap our arms around ourselves as we plunge into the cold night air. Are we trying to hide our color? Our differences? For in the open air, we are not masked. We are naked. We are different. And we are definitely not blind.

Do we need to mend these differences of color? I do not think so. We need to mend the differences in our prayers, in our thanks, and in our dreams. For our hate, oppression and denial lie there. In our hearts and in our minds. In the parts of our bodies that truly do look the same. We must be equal, similar in our soul. For that is how we are created. Identical in mind and soul, but not in skin and race. That is how we were intended to be. But we are ignorant. We are blind in that we cannot see these distinctions. "We are all one color." No. No. No. But we must be of the same heart.

Together, we submerge our bodies in the cold waters of the creek and we replenish our bodies with the water

that we have lost. With bitterness that we will soon need to rid ourselves of. Again and again.

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The preceding essays were submitted from Ms. Kate Coon's 11th and 12th Grade English classes at The Noble and Greenough School in Dedham, MA. Ms. Coon participated in Northeastern University's two year NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities) Summer Institute, From Phillis Wheatley to Toni Morrison. The goal of these Institutes was to promote teaching and learning about African American literature in middle and secondary schools. Ms. Coon's students had read Richard Wright's novel Native Son and were asked to use the novel, a personal experience, and something outside their personal experience as their sources for these essays.

The editors of the Richard Wright Circle Newsletter encourage you to share your responses as you teach and as your students read Richard Wright's work. We encourage submissions from both secondary and post-secondary instructors and students. Please submit manuscripts to Jerry Ward, Tougaloo College, English Department, Tougaloo, MS 39174.

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Wright National Teleconference

To celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of *Blacy Boy* and Wright's other contributions to the world of letters, Mississippi Educational Television sponsored a Satellite Educational Resources Consortium (SERC) teleconference on October 4, 1995, 2:00-3:30 CDT, with a grant from the Mississippi Humanities Council. Co-hosted by Jolee Hussey, a librarian from Oxford (MS) High School and Jerry Ward of the University of Memphis, the teleconference provided a forum for Julia Wright, Joyce Ann Joyce, Margaret Walker Alexander, Kenneth Kinnamon, Maryemma Graham, and Madison Davis Lacy to

discuss the documentary *Richard Wright: Black Boy*, the relevance of Wright's work for contemporary readers, and directions for critical study of Wright's later works with teachers and students across the United States.

Those who wish to have a copy of the Teacher's Guide for the documentary may request one by calling Mississippi Educational Television Distance Learning at (601) 982-6727 or by faxing the request to (601) 987-3084.

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Editors' Note:

We apologize to our members for the delay in the publication of this issue.

On the other hand, we have made some substantial improvements to the Newsletter thanks to the work of our editorial assistant Julie Jackson-Forsberg. Our next issue promises to be delivered on time in late Fall.

Maryemma Graham
Jerry Ward, Jr.

Richard Wright Circle Membership



Please Detach Here

For a one year membership to the *Richard Wright Circle*, send the information below and a \$10 check or money order to The Richard Wright Circle, c/o Maryemma Graham, Northeastern University, 406 Holmes Hall, Boston, MA 02115; (617) 373-4549; Fax (617) 373-2509; E-mail rwc@lynx.neu.edu

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