



# HERITAGE

BLACK STUDIES PROGRAM ♦ PROVIDENCE COLLEGE ♦ WINTER 2016

# THE HERITAGE JOURNAL

Winter 2016

The Heritage Journal is a biannual newsletter for the Black Studies Program at Providence College. We invite our scholarly community—students, faculty, staff, alum and community members to contribute to Heritage. Pieces can take multiple forms such as art, poetry or prose; they can be reflective or analytical.

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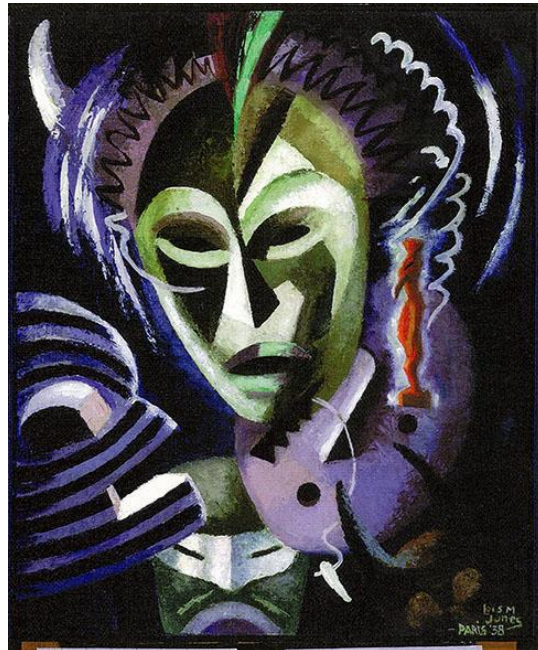
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# Heritage Journal, Winter 2016

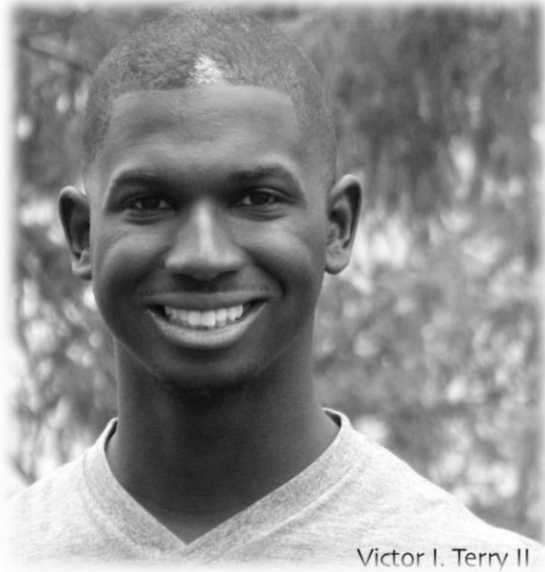
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# Letter from the Editor

*Victor Terry, 2015-2016 Graduate Assistant*



Victor I. Terry II

Dear Readers:

Since coming on board as the Black Studies Graduate Assistant I have worked to ensure that the various voices within the African Diaspora are heard. Watching Dr. Julia Jordan-Zachery's commitment to the liberation of Black and Brown people inspired me to not only work on publishing a Black Studies Newsletter but to push myself to center the voices of people whose histories are too commonly disregarded and overlooked. Thus, the Heritage Journal was created. Through this publication the various authors explore the untold stories and inconvenient histories of Black and Brown people.

The brave authors have truly bled their hearts into their beautiful essays. I thank them for their bravery. Dr. Jordan-Zachery, who has dedicated more hours than Providence College could ever compensate her for, I thank her for her unrelenting commitment to her students, community and laboratory education. Lastly, I thank you for venturing onto this journey of discovery, reliance, and empowerment.

Best regards,

Victor Terry

# Note from the Director

*Julia Jordan-Zachery, Director and Professor of Public and Community Service*



Last year, our campus was filled with protest and demands for a more just and equitable community. Students of color and their allies raised issues of identity and belonging and how as a community we create an environment that not simply recognizes differences in the abstract, but instead seeks to create substantive inclusion that is built on justice and equity. Students, faculty and staff protested in an attempt to resist dominant narratives and practices, but also to offer their imagination of a community that values and protects their humanity—one that allows them to simultaneously survive and thrive.

In 1995 a dedicated group of students and faculty organized to create the Black Studies Program. They argued that the identities of some were missing on our campus, particularly in the curriculum. In 2015 a coalition of students, faculty and staff once again asked this question—Where are Black, Brown, LGBTQ, immigrants and other “marginalized” voices in the curriculum? This suggests that while we have made some progress, there is room for us to grow.

In our first issue of *Heritage*, the various authors pick up on many of the central themes that undergird student protest not only on our campus but nationwide. They also grapple with many of the issues that 1995 group confronted. The themes that travel through these various spaces and times are: identity, resistance and agency. These are themes that are long standing in the African Diasporic struggles for freedom.

As you engage the various articles that make up the *Heritage*, we invite you to read them as contemporary explorations of the above themes while considering them alongside longstanding Diasporic Black assertions of self-articulation and agency.

May we all move, together, to a place of justice and freedom. Ashe!

# coming together is the beginning

*cathleen mallorie williams*

in pokanoket thought, coming together is the beginning. it's a powerful statement, and it's been the guiding principle as i penned this article attempting to nail down the complexities and calamities of my experience. it's most powerful because it implies a previous separation. and that you can't begin until you're whole.

i suppose you could say this is my humble attempt at becoming whole, as my auntie (a tribal elder) phrases it. both communities i represent have been embroiled in a constant struggle with the white supremacist struggle for visibility since the dawn of american history. so to insist on being whole, on coming together and on beginning, is inherently political. thus, the question i am charged with is: how do i create space for *me*?

i suppose the first step is to out myself publicly. this is big. for almost the last decade, i would have died before i told you i'm black pokanoket wampanoag—or, if we're being totally reductionist, black indian. never mind the fact that i was born and raised in providence, rhode island, one of the first colonial settlements in america where native american and black people have been in community since the seventeenth century; that i and my family are born of, and in constant contention with, this history.

so it's ironic for me to write about visibility because, as a new englander, i'm coming from the fringes of both indian country and black america, the very intentionally invisible meridian between the projects and the rez. white people have taken great pains to whitewash new england, so black

america and indian country alike often call into question the respective cultural legitimacies of black and native people here. in other words (as i've heard and have been told), there aren't "real" black folks or "real" indians where i come from. perhaps that is where the irony really lies because, in the linear narrative of american history we tell ourselves, it was in new england that the old and new worlds first collided. here they exploded in a racially ambiguous, colored/brown/"what are you, anyway?" supernova: the afterlife of colonization, genocide, and chattel slavery in the all-consuming contexts of white supremacy and anti-blackness.

inhabiting this cultural and literal (physical) space is as odd, surprising, and disconcerting as it sounds. miraculously, though, i grew up with some exposure to my indigenous heritage thanks to my grandparents. but when they died within a year of each other, the task of explaining myself and my ontology became overwhelming. this was the end of 2007. i was fifteen and a sophomore at a snobby private school in providence. in the days and weeks after thanksgiving and into the new year, i pressed the flowers from my grandparents' funerals in my bible; turned sixteen a week before the first inauguration of barack obama, which i watched starry-eyed and hopeful with the rest of black america; and i decided once and for all i could no longer be pokanoket wampanoag.

it's a hell of a thing to be fifteen and struggling to be acknowledged. it seemed that no matter who i encountered, i was often mistaken for biracial (as in, black and white), cape verdean,

dominican, or puerto rican. i was never “black enough” in terms of my phenotype and my mannerisms—and, of course, the dominant narrative is that native americans don’t exist anymore. at school, my white teachers and peers policed my identity on a daily basis. while my classmates worried about prom dates and asking their crush out to pizza after school, i confronted and struggled with the american obsession with racial pigeonholing. every day, i was charged with explaining the whole of my complex history—of justifying my very being.

thus, i learned that the thing about the black indian thing is that it’s contentious at best. my heritage and my experience as a brown-skinned new england girl implicates everyone—and i do mean *everyone*—in this country. regardless of one’s positionality, the black indian identity inevitably opens up questions of race vis-à-vis blackness and native-ness (e.g., what does it mean to be black? what does it mean to be native?). it is a pandora’s box of our misconceptions about, and obsessions with, race, the romanticizing of native americans, blood quantum, the one-drop rule. ultimately, its real controversy lies in that it requires us to confront histories of oppression that the white establishment has deemed inconvenient.

america has complicated the act of existing for me which, where i came from, went unquestioned and undiscussed. in my family, there were never any useless fractions or percentages assigned to either ethnicity, nor any mythical, full-blooded cherokee princesses floating around my family tree. the very real people who do populate my family tree are *powwas* and preachers, black panthers and tribal elders, activists in both communities; schoolteachers, nurses, veterans, catholics, red sox fans—my parents, grandparents,

aunts, uncles, and cousins. some of my family “look” black, live their lives exclusively as black people, and are very involved in the black community; others “look” native, live their lives exclusively as native people, and are very involved in the tribe, native community of new england, and indian country writ large. we didn’t necessarily talk about our duality all the time, but we surely lived it. so i tried to assert both sides of my heritage authentically. eventually, though, i just accepted that anti-blackness (in the form of desiring to be anything but black) is the lens through which most people would perceive my pokanoket heritage. i also didn’t like how in that paradigm, being native does not exist as a viable and relevant cultural identity, but it functions only as an object, and one whose sole function is to abet anti-blackness.

for about the last eight years, i’ve been constructing an exclusively black american identity. in college, i soaked up every bit of black history, literature and culture i came across. the more i learned about black experiences in this country and the world, the more i critiqued and deconstructed the idea of blackness as a monolith. consequently, the once-potent accusation of not being “black enough” lost its sting. i felt more than sufficiently black, and proud of it. as i started to become more radical in my thinking, however, i felt convicted that i had all but abandoned my wampanoag heritage. how could i be a conscious person of color if i was consciously editing my history to exclude another disempowered group? the short answer: not very.

that’s how i got here, negotiating the decidedly rebellious act of insisting on a black and pokanoket duality. in the last eight years, the flowers from my grandparents’ funerals have all but disintegrated in the thin pages of paul’s epistles; the myth of post-racial america has been



stained by the blood of trayvon martin, sara lee circle bear, freddie gray, paul castaway, sandra bland, laquan mcdonald, and countless other black and native victims of systemic, racialized american violence. barack obama is leaving the white house soon, and the whole of (non-white) america watches anxiously to see which of the odd assortment of candidates will be his predecessor. most importantly, in the last eight years, i graduated high school and went to college, where i learned definitively that while i don't have many of the answers i want, i'd better start asking the right questions. and i realized it is impossible for me to not be pokanoket.

existing in and between two oppressed groups is not easy. it challenges me to scrutinize and confront myself but i don't always do this well. sometimes i fall into the colonality of it all: on any given day i might wonder if my hair is too curly, if my skin is too light, if i look black enough, wampanoag enough. i push back ideologically against the insidious "enough" in both communities, but there are times i yet fall victim to it interpersonally, offering explanations for my being to black and native people, attempting to justify my inbetweenness in a way that isn't steeped in colonial bs. to that end, i find that i am extremely self-aware in native american spaces. as someone who doesn't fit the narrow american idea of what native people look like, my phenotype gives me the option to pass. i don't know if it's a privilege or an advantage, but it is a *thing*, and one of which i am cognizant at any given time.

another issue i deal with, particularly with family members who identify exclusively as black, is the idea that ultimately, how we identify ourselves doesn't matter because the white establishment sees and treats us as black anyways.

this is true, but it's also rooted in some extremely colonial and racist thinking. the connotation is that black people are black only because white people told us so; that by othering us, *white people* define blackness and give us our identity. i can't speak for anyone else, but my blackness is not a default identity i'm reluctant to accept. i'm black because of my history and heritage, not because white america told me that's what i have to be.

my second issue is that this theory is premised on the old "white is right" racial hierarchy that places black people at the bottom. the corollary is that natives are higher up on the racial food chain and, consequently, better off than black folks in america. this isn't true no matter which way you slice it. native communities are plagued by the same systems of oppression that breed all sorts of problems (poverty, mental illness, addiction). native americans are also the racial group in america most likely to be killed by law enforcement—a reality with which blacks are all too familiar, given the slave patrol history of the modern police force and the string of highly publicized and extremely brutal deaths of black men, women, and children within the last few years. my point is that the oppression is rooted in the same historical power structures that would prefer we don't recognize the connections.

but the biggest point of contention is how i find space as a modern new england pokanoket black girl. where i come from, we've been doing the black indian thing for a while, but perhaps it's time we rethink some approaches. perhaps my upbringing, connection to my tribe, and experience navigating this duality my whole life make me a little less inclined to follow the paradigm. as i reclaim this identity i once turned away from, i find

i'm not interested in validating my existence to the white power structure's liking. our obsession over blood quantum (an imposed, euro-american construct) is a convenient distraction from all that's killing us— police, poverty, drugs, alcohol, among other vestiges of colonialism and chattel slavery.

so in finding my space, i want to challenge my communities to imagine ourselves outside of the paradigms imposed on us. i want us to interrogate blood quantum on a structural level, examining our obsession with skin color and hair texture as it relates to the proverbial “enough.” i want us new englanders to insist on our history, how we grew up, and how we are related in building and maintaining community. to that end, i want us to re-evaluate who *we* are, as new england indians, and not define ourselves in reaction to our brothers and sisters from the plains and southwest. i want phenotypically white european people who often frequent native american spaces to critique themselves; to understand what we mean when we say they're playing indian; to think about the privilege with which they move in america and what that means for *them* to bring *that* into our spaces.

it suffices to say i have a wish list (so to speak), but really, what do i know? i am simply your run-of-the-mill rhode island problem minority espousing some unpopular, stigmatized

histories; a black girl in indian country and a pokanoket girl in black america who wants more from this rebellious act of being. i can neither un-complicate nor abridge the histories and experiences of my people. i'm just trying to come together, get my sh\*t together, and stop apologizing for myself. in the context of colonization, genocide and slavery, i'm learning to embrace that I, in my pokanoket/black body, defy the narrative of the disappearing native. i celebrate my blackness and contest the coloniality of power intrinsic to the one-drop rule, insisting on the duality that speaks not only to my whole history, but to the centuries-old solidarity between two of the most disempowered groups in this country.

in a lot of ways, i suppose this is less of a new approach to a hotly contested racial/cultural american identity and more of a confession from a black pokanoket historian with lots of hope and love for her people everywhere they exist despite all odds. we're coming together, and we are rising. from the reservations of south dakota, arizona, montana, new mexico, to the ghettos of chicago, los angeles, new orleans, new york, providence, we are standing up, the prophesied seventh generation: denied necessarily american millennials stepping into big, impossible dreams.

i don't have all the answers. just a lot of faith.

# Black Women & Girls Symposium

Producers of Knowledge & Agents of Change



The Black Studies Program played a critical role, working in conjunction with the Research on Black Women and Girls, in organizing the first Black Women and Girls Symposium, September 9, 2016. This Symposium attracted over 150 participants, some of whom traveled as far away as California to attend. Presenters and participants came from a wide range—including college faculty, college students, community members and young women from Sophia Academy. They critically engaged in and celebrated how Black women and girls create space and engage in a politics of self-articulation.

# On the Whiteness of Biracial Folk

*Jordan Mann*

As the mixed-race children of two doctors—one, a white Jew from Great Neck, New York, the real-life city that inspired *The Great Gatsby's* West Egg; the other, a black woman from Saint Louis, who, at Natural Bridge and Kingshighway, was raised near nothing great to speak of—my sister and I have understandably complex racial identities. We are black. We are, by both race and religion, Jewish. If you really go through our ancestry, you might find that we are second or third generation Russians, that we have Sioux Native American blood, and probably that of some other culture I'm not even aware of, running through our veins. Still, while deciding how to appreciate the amalgam of cultures an individual comes from (for example, Madison and I were never raised among nor do we really identify with the Russian or Native cultures) is certainly not a unique experience in this place that calls itself the melting pot of the world. Growing up and attempting to reconcile the expectations of Black and Jewish culture has always proved challenging, not only because of their contradictory nature, but also because we had to do it completely on our own, without anyone nearby who really understood us. Madison and I had to figure out how to have pride in one culture while in the social realm of another—what happens to my blackness when I'm hanging out with a bunch of Jews? We had to bear the words of family members who oftentimes didn't understand the other culture—have you ever had your great aunt tell you the members of your black family seemed white to her? Or that you

shouldn't get dreadlocks because they have a “criminal element” to them? Have you ever had your black Baptist grandmother tell you that your people burned Jesus Christ?

I have, and it sucks. But none of these challenges was, has been, or is currently greater than figuring out my whiteness. As you may have noticed, I do have a white father. And, as you may have noticed, white is a notable—and deliberate—omission from the list of cultures I identify with. So maybe I should have included an addendum to that last sentence, “none of these challenges is currently greater than figuring out my whiteness, *or lack thereof*,” because I do not identify as “white” in any fraction, percentage, or capacity whatsoever. Neither does my sister, and neither should we.

The most common objection to this decision is the indictment that in choosing not to identify as white, I have disrespected and forsaken the culture of the man that raised me. Frankly, this is ridiculous. My dad cares about his Jewishness, not his whiteness, and I've always embraced that part of my culture. More importantly, my father is complicit in my choosing to identify that way: he's told me a story of when I, as a toddler, wanted to be white. This was probably to be expected considering [1] the social climate responsible for the black Barbie doll study and [2] that my primary role model's skin is pallid even for a white man. In this story, however, my father reminds me of my blackness, dispels the notion that I am white, and expects me to have pride in myself nonetheless.

Therefore, in choosing not to identify with whiteness, I've shown nothing but a son's deference.

Even so, I do receive consistent criticism on my identity. This criticism comes mostly from white people and typically revolves around the notion that I am part white.

Historically speaking, this is ironic: "half-black" slaves in the early 1800s weren't put "half" to work and given "half" of the benefits of the lavish lifestyle that their labor provided the owners; "half-black" children weren't given a 50/50 opportunity to leave the underfunded black schoolhouses of the pre *Brown v. Board of Education* era for a better education, nor were the schools they attended—places for black learning—often given even "half" the finances of their white counterparts; Homer Plessy was "one-eighth black"—the man only had one "fully black" grandparent—but even after he fought it in court in 1896, they still sat him in the back of the train. Even before the one-drop rule came into law in a number of states, parts of society classified mixed-race individuals as mulatto, mestizo, or as simply of their non-European race. Throughout America's history, from the slave era to Jim Crow, the language and law surrounding people of mixed descent has fixated on categorization and separation. The concept of inclusion was largely done away with, at least not as it related to the societal benefits of whiteness, which were always, of course, bestowed on white people by white people.

The implications of this extend to the very definition of whiteness itself. In 2000, the New York Times published the results of a study on race. The study concluded that the DNA differences between white people and people of

color were minute, and that consequently, race—not culture, but race—is an entirely social phenomenon...not that we should need a study to tell us this. Therefore, the history of race in America leads to the following conclusion: white is an ethnic group based entirely on exclusivity: the absence of non-European races, cultures, or ethnicities. Never has there been a middle, and never have white people wanted there to exist, a "halfway back" of the bus.

That is, until now. Suddenly, the fact that I have one black parent and one white parent means I should take as much pride in my whiteness as I do my blackness, that I have as much *or more* in common with my white friends as my black ones.

The question begs to be asked: why do white millennials expect and actively want individuals with only one white parent to identify with whiteness?

One must look no further than today's pop culture to find the answer. We live in the age of Miley Cyrus and Iggy Azalea, the age in which white girls twerk and white friends teach me that they can say "nigga" because with an 'a' it means friend, according to their favorite rap artists. Now, this isn't to suggest cultural appropriation is some sort of new phenomenon—I can emphatically state that it's not—but in my lifetime, this is the most publicly and prominently it's been put on display: never before has being black been so cool!

But really, it's the *illusion* of blackness these artists embody, not the experience of *actually being black*. To elaborate, here is an analogy that one of my white friends came up with to help himself understand the perverse nature of cultural appropriation:

Imagine you're in a group of students that gets bullied regularly. Say, for reading comic

books. One day out of nowhere, the people who bullied you start reading comic books. They're superficial fans of the comics, but they make their comic fan hood very public. Suddenly, it becomes very trendy to be reading the comics they like, but nobody gives you or your friends credit or respect for starting the trend. In fact, people still make fun of you for the comics you read—including those same people who bullied you earlier!

This experience would leave a bad taste in my mouth, and I'd be willing to bet it'd do the same for you. In this analogy, the recipients of this abuse represent people of color. The bullies represent white people that receive credit for starting a cultural revolution when in actuality, they have done nothing more than appropriating the culture of minorities. But while Miley, Iggy, Katy, and others benefit from twerking (albeit poorly), having curves, and from rolling out parades of black artists including Snoop Dogg, Juicy J, and Kanye West as featured artists in cross-genre songs, none of them bear the burden of actually being black in American society.

People who expect me to identify as white don't understand this. My blackness isn't about swagger, the ability to finish rap lyrics, getting picked first in basketball, or having people think I can dance—it's about the fact that I live the life of a black person, despite the race of my father. I've had a high school dean treat me like a problem child for no reason until my grades came out and he, in a state of shock, told another teacher, "you should have seen the 'A's on his report card!", and I've watched passers-by clutch their purses and shy away from me when I'm talking to my barber on

the sidewalk; I've spoken with my sister about how she, because of her black facial features and in spite of her near-white complexion, struggled with the concept of her own beauty among white peers, and I've heard my grandmother lament the effect of racist establishments on her family, friends, and the black community in Saint Louis. And of course, there's that other thing: sometimes, people approach me just to call me a nigger and run away.

This isn't to say that my blackness revolves around experiencing racism—from the times I've spent with my mom's family to those with Jack and Jill, Kappa League, and other parts of the community, I've had plenty of positive experiences with my culture. But I choose not to elaborate here because, unfortunately, these experiences won't help you understand my refusal to identify with whiteness.

Whiteness exists solely to separate people—it does nothing to bring Germans closer to the French, to bring Protestants closer to Catholics except to label them as "not a person of color." It is a sociological concept built on exclusivity that provides certain individuals with an ability to live their lives in utter ignorance of the experiences I've described. I can't take part in whiteness—I don't know what it's like not to have these problems—so while I will proudly proclaim my Judaism or share my family's Russian ancestry, while my father is a very pale white man and I have no desire to ignore any part of his culture, I simply cannot understand the everyday experience of white people in America.

So why should I identify with it?

“You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read.”

-James Baldwin



# Understanding the Black Male's Quest for Identity as Illustrated through *Native Son*

*Martez Files*

The history of African-American writing is a complex subject. Since the foregrounding of this literary canon there have been writers who have attempted to present African-Americans as agents of their social realities. These writers have literally had to write Black people into history because societal norms, historically, dehumanized this group into anonymity. Some of the first writings of African-Americans that gained national attention are the ex-slave narratives which offer the reader some clues as to what the human experience of suffering was like for these people. In many ways Black writers have mimicked the tradition of depicting Black characters battling human experiences. Richard Wright is no different in these literary pursuits as he also, expressly, humanizes his characters. Nonetheless, some scholars contend that Black marginalization in literature will continue to reverberate because the Black characters exist in a White world and they are on an everlasting quest for identity. In many ways, Wright's character Bigger Thomas elucidates this argument because throughout the novel he, too, is on a quest for identity.

Social scientist, Ali Poordaryaei Nejad, is a scholar who has written on the identity crisis that Black characters face in literature. Nejad's article entitled, *Foregrounding the Quest for Lost Identity in Wright's Native Son*, offers a contemporary understanding of the novel. Of Black characters, Nejad writes, "they will be marginalized and racial

merger will make them quest their own real identity, because they have become the emptied out shell." He contends that because Blackness is so diverse and Whiteness is so sovereign that Black people are becoming lost in the White world because their various character traits are suppressed by the oppressive presence of Whiteness. His argument is one in which he presents Blacks as an "emptied-out shell" and another in which he echoes the sentiment that Whites are "sovereign," meaning they reign supreme, even in Black literature.

One might contend that Nejad does not take into account that this "emptied-out shell" to which he refers is not influenced first by White sovereignty but by that of a Black parental figure. This is true in many African-American writings. The main character in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* illustrates this through the earlier teaching of the grandfather. Similarly, *Native Son's* Bigger Thomas is influenced heavily by his mother in the beginning of the novel. It is this interaction that forges the foregrounding for Bigger's continuous search for identity in the novel.

The quest for identity can be seen in the opening scene of *Native Son* in which Bigger is the father-like figure of his home and is tasked with the responsibility of ridding his home of the big Black rat. In those earlier moments he is the savior of his home. During those same moments his child-like nature resonates when he plays on his sister's fear



of the rat. In the beginning Bigger's mother screams, "There he is again, Bigger!" Thus, the parent is depending on her child for protection. In a later breath, after Bigger begins to act child-like again, she scolds him, "Boy, sometimes I wonder what makes you act like you do." One could contend that it is situations similar to this that confuses Bigger. Is he an adult that can save his family in times of great peril? Or is he an immature teenager that still requires scolding for bad behavior? This psychological issue could quite possibly be viewed as his first identity crisis. Surely, it is plausible that Bigger is forced to be whoever people need him to be at any given moment. However, how does this personality shift impact Bigger?

One other way that the quest for identity presents itself is in Bigger's gang affiliations. In his article, Nejad writes, "In this sense, Aime J. Ellis claims that 'social grouping among poor urban black males was a strategy meant to ease psychological anxiety and to make a sense of a world filled with racial terror'...it is for the same reason that Bigger joins the gang." The claim that social grouping is a coping mechanism used "to ease psychological anxiety" is definitely legitimate. However, this argument fails to account for the mental confusion that social groups can also cause. There are a few instances in the novel in which Bigger's friends add to his psychological trauma. Also, instead of "making sense of a world filled with racial terror" they further exacerbate this worldly understanding.

Concomitantly, there are several examples of friends adding to psychological trauma as we explore the scenes in the novel that depict Bigger Thomas with his friends. A great illumination of this relationship is present when Bigger asks Gus

to play "White." Although, Gus rejects Bigger's request in the beginning he soon acquiesces to Bigger's will and plays the game. Whiteness for Bigger, at first, is a military captain who is well versed in military strategy. However, for Gus, Whiteness represents money, power, and industrial control. Gus states, "This is Mr. J.P. Morgan speaking.....I want to sell twenty thousand shares of U.S. Steele in the market this morning." And Bigger replies, "At what price, suh?" This line confirms that Bigger believes that no matter what is being sold, White people, at a whim, simply ask the price. In many ways Gus has just added to Bigger's identity crisis because he made a statement about economics, industry, and capital and Bigger accepts it as the dominant reality. Clearly, there exists an issue when two Black boys feel that the only way they can ever feel powerful is to play "White." Playing White allows them to create a new identity one of which is more powerful, intelligent, and richer than their own.

Thus, Nejad's claim that the sovereignty of Whiteness presented in Black literature is to blame for the identity crisis is not holistically true. In fact, the real culprit for this crisis is Black perceptions of Whiteness not necessarily Whiteness itself. There is a scene from the novel in which the perceptions of Whiteness presents itself through a song that Gus and Bigger sing, the lyrics are: "Zooooooooom.....They got everything.....They own the world." It is thoughts such as these that play out in the grand scheme of Bigger's life, circumstances, and consequences. Also, one might even argue that it is the depreciation of Blackness that really plagues Bigger in his quest for identity.

One common reading of *Native Son* suggests that the search for identity revolves

completely around the search for power. Many scholars argue that Whiteness, in the novel, is seen as this “great natural force” arguably Whiteness is power and Blackness is powerlessness. This assessment is very questionable. It would be ignorant to disagree that there is not a preoccupation with the color White in the novel but one must note that White is the contrast color to Black. In that regard White does not serve as the representation of this looming power, yet, simply as a presence to expose what is Black.

Thus, Bigger discovers himself when he loses his perceptions of Whiteness as more powerful than him. There is one incident that leads to this new discovery of self. It is the scene in which Bigger is taking the drunk, Mary Dalton, to her room and in an attempt to keep her quiet he mistakenly suffocates her to death. Then the fear of what he had just done overcomes him and he decapitates Mary and throws her body in the furnace to get rid of any evidence. The first part of Mary’s murder is purely accidental but the events that follow are clearly well thought out and executed. Thus, Bigger for the first time has committed a crime against a White person.

In this new found discovery of self that comes with facing his fears, Bigger concocts a plan to receive a ransom for the missing Mary Dalton. His plan, for a while, goes off seamlessly, however, after a while pieces of Bigger’s story begin to unravel and he finds himself in a situation where he needs to run. Bigger at this point is on such of a power high that he decides that he wants to see how it will all unfold before he leaves. Here is where it can be argued that Bigger’s sense of Blackness—power—comes into the equation. He actually feels that he can get away with what he has done. Wright writes, “Again the thought that he had the chance

to walk out of here and be clear of it all came to him, and again he brushed it aside. He was tensely eager to....see how it would all end, even if that end swallowed him in [B]lackness.” At this point Bigger does not care if he gets away with his crime, the fact that he has out-witted all these White people is prize enough for him. Arguably, this is an allusion to those who sacrifice themselves for their people. While Bigger does not view himself as a hero he does see himself as powerful. The argument can surely be made that Bigger Thomas could fit into the conceptualization of a sacrificial lamb. Hence, Bigger Thomas’s identity lies in his self-sacrifice and surrender.

So how is Bigger Thomas on a quest for identity and does he ever find it? While it is not expressively possible to conclude that Bigger “finds” himself, he might be viewed as a sacrificial lamb by some. Surely, Ali Poordaryaei Nejad’s *Foregrounding the Quest for Lost Identity in Wright's Native Son* does offer some contemporary understanding of a classic novel, but the overall scheme of things is somewhat neglected in a few instances of the work. Nejad suggests that “White sovereignty” and the idea of this Black “empty shell” marginalizes Black characters but one could contend, as this research does, that those Black character’s marginalization begins even before any interaction with a White presence. Their marginality starts with a parental Black figure that offers them some advice about coping in society. Another important part of the identity quest involves friends. Nejad argues that social grouping is a coping mechanism that offers Bigger Thomas a sense of sanity in a racialized society; however, one could contend that social grouping can further confound one’s understanding of society. *Native Son* presents this bewilderment in the scene in

which Bigger and Gus play “White.” However, this identity quest comes to an end when bigger faces his fears about the “all powerful” White presence. Thus, Bigger understands his power when he tricks

the White characters into believing his story. His power high cause him to act irrational and in many ways bigger loses himself again in a psychosis of power.

#### References:

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# The Collaborative for the Research on Black Women and Girls

The Collaborative for the Research on Black Women and Girls is a multidisciplinary research group that centers the experiences of Black women and girls. It is interested in exploring the diverse lived realities of Black women and girls across varied geographical and social locations. The purpose of the group is to explore the ways in which Black womanhood and girlhood intersects and interacts with other social categories such as nationality, religion, class, sexuality, etc. The Collaborative also seeks to support scholars who engage in research on Black women and girls, and develop practical ways to bring the knowledges of Black women and girls into the classroom and other critical spaces.

Historically, Black women and girls have used their voices to critique society and to offer a vision of society that is more just and equitable. They constitute a significant percent of the labor force and voting public, and they have been key organizers of the “modern” Civil Rights Movement and the more recent #BlackLivesMatter movement. Yet, Black girls and women remain particularly understudied and are often rendered invisible in socio-economic and cultural understandings of their role in not only the Black community, but also the larger community. This Collaborative centers their knowledge production by offering a space for scholars and community activists to critically engage knowledge produced by Black girls and women.



*Left to right: Makeen Zachery, Maiyah Rivers, Julia Jordan-Zachery, Kamille Gentles-Peart*

# My American Dream

*Victor Terry*

The idea of The American Dream has always fascinated me. The notion is that if you work hard, do well and pull yourself up by your bootstraps you can achieve greatness in America. As a young Black boy in Mississippi this was almost forced fed to me every day. I was also made aware that for me to achieve The American Dream I would have to work harder than the white kids and my father made sure to point out that I would have to work harder than the light skinned Black kids as well.

Being ready to escape the traps of poverty, that I had seen engulf my family and friends around me, I worked tirelessly in school to make the best grades and in life to avoid unwanted attention. I did not want to have a baby at a young age. I did not want to be gay and bring shame upon my family before I died of AIDS. I did not want to be a high school dropout. I did not want to run into any type of legal problems and go to jail where I was surely going to be raped. And this wanting to escape and never look back drove my actions my entire life.

When I entered college I was so close to The American Dream I could taste it. As a first generation college student I took a massive amount of classes every semester and always invested in the professor's opinion, making it clear that I did not have my own and that I agreed with whatever they said. I took summer classes and joined the Student Government Association to prove my worth. To top it all off I joined an elite Black Greek Letter Fraternity to assert my status. Graduation day was a day of celebration because I felt I had

escaped, and not only did I escape, I escaped without a police record, a baby or AIDS.

My degree was my stamp of approval for The American Dream, and I relished in this approval. It wasn't until one fall afternoon that the Mississippi winds blew a reality check my way. I was driving to my mother's house, which happened to be by the university I attended. During this seemingly routine drive I was pulled over for what seemed like a routine traffic stop. The officer approached my car and asked, "Do you know why I stopped you today?" I replied with a polite no sir. He then told me in a very friendly manner to step out of my car and he would show me why. I complied and he walked me to the back of my car and pointed to my fraternity license plate frame and said it was not in regulation with the state's laws. I assured him that this was an honest mistake that I would fix immediately. He smiled. I smiled and started back for my driver's seat. Then he stopped me and instructed me to put both my hands on the trunk of my car and spread my legs. I was frisked right down the street from the university that I thought liberated me from such actions.

My humiliation did not end after I was frisked. The officer told me that I could let him search my car or he could bring the drug dogs out. Never did he ask to search my car. Ready to have this treatment end I agreed to let him search my car. I had never been more afraid of going to jail than on that day. And at that moment I realized that my college degree did not serve as sufficient enough freedom papers. I realized that I had very limited

control over my body. And most of all I realized that keeping my mouth shut and my head low did not guarantee me survival. Knowing the Queen's English did not guarantee my survival. I realized that I will forever only be an observer of The American Dream because I could never truly achieve it.

In this revelation I found myself. I found pride in my race and in my experiences. I found my voice. I found something to fight for. I woke up from the idea of The American Dream and I found Malcolm X waiting for me, I found radical Amiri Baraka waiting for me, I found Sonia Sanchez waiting for me, I found Assata Shakur waiting for me. I found true liberation waiting for me.

# CONGRATULATIONS CLASS OF 2016

*McHenold Aurelien*

*Karissa Díaz*

*Michelle Grasso*

*Rilwan Ilumoka*

*Biverly Jeannis*

*Melvin Kaska*

*Daphney Lachapelle*

*Joelle Pisani*

**BLACK STUDIES PROGRAM**

**2016 AWARDS**

**The Mary McLeod Bethune Award for Academic Excellence**

The Mary McLeod Bethune Award recognizes academic and scholarly achievement by a Black Studies graduating senior who embodies the academic vigor of Mary McLeod Bethune. Candidates for this award have significantly contributed, in terms of academics and scholarship, to the intellectual discourses of African and African American Diasporic research and praxis.

**2016 Recipient - Rilwan Ilumoka** Mary McLeod Behune—Academic Excellence

**The Amílcar Cabral Freedom Award**

The Amílcar Cabral Freedom Award recognizes a Black Studies minor graduating senior who has promoted the principles of Black Studies through leadership. The recipient displays a deep commitment to social justice and has shown an ability to transform this commitment into effective action while at Providence College.

**2016 Recipient - Karissa Diaz**—Amicar Cabral—Activism/Student leadership





## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to sincerely thank Dr. William Hogan, Associate Professor of English and Director of the Center for Engaged Learning, for the support and financial contribution in the production of the Heritage Journal. We also recognize the coalition who is seeking to make our community more just and equitable. May the Demands be met.

## **CALL FOR PAPERS**

We invite our scholarly community—students, faculty, staff, alum and community members to contribute to Heritage. Our theme for the AY 2016-17 is “University Based and Community Centered: A Year of the African Diaspora Woman”. In line with that theme and the ongoing struggles for representation and equality, we invite you to contribute an “article” that address, but not necessarily limited to the following: activism and Black womanhood, the meaning of Black womanhood/girlhood, living Blackness in the digital age. Pieces can take multiple forms such as art, poetry or prose; they can be reflective or analytical. We do ask that all submission be no more than 400 words. Submissions to be sent to [black.studies@providence.edu](mailto:black.studies@providence.edu) no later than February 15, 2017. We are also calling on the artist among us to help us design our next cover. Thanks in advance for your contribution.



BLACK STUDIES PROGRAM