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Writing Samples
(five excerpts total)

Note: the excerpts here are mostly academic, journalistic, and creative

Sample 1 – an excerpt from an academic paper (a literary analysis)

Social Realism and Feminist Protest in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Set in the 1930s and published in 1940, Richard Wright's *Native Son* details the violent crimes of 20-year-old Bigger Thomas in Chicago's south side. The novel speaks to the inevitability of African American impoverishment and moral decay by showing how income inequality and systemic racism perpetuate the frustrations, failures, and uprisings of the poor working class. In the end, the American Dream is rendered inaccessible. Because *Native Son* opened an important dialogue about the fear and hate driving American culture to that point, it had, not surprisingly, many detractors.

African American writer James Baldwin called it protest literature with little insight into human nature and even less artistic value. Others decried the novel, saying it asked readers to sympathize with a murderer. Most, however, cited not the protagonist or his crimes themselves as a primary concern, but rather Wright as storyteller and writer of *female* characters. He was bluntly maligned as a misogynist who crafted black women as unabashedly undignified – often weak, useless, and hypersexual. Critics note that even to the extent that black women *do* nurture black men in Wright's works, it is in a problematic way, intertwining guilt and accusation and ultimately emasculating them with emphasis on physical survival over spiritual growth. They further argue that Wright's apparent indictment on women transcends stereotype; it is aggressively pathological.

This paper purports to complicate these interpretations of Wright's women, and his intentions in the crafting of them, to uncover the social realism underlying their behavior and values. I will demonstrate how much of what seems unflattering toward black women is more accurately understood in terms of their unique experiences and feelings in social exchange, as

well as distinct dynamics between African American men and women, highlighting the struggles they have endured for centuries. Moreover, I will show that the foibles and liabilities Wright's women *seem* to embody may be framed as feminist protest.

First, Bigger's girlfriend, Bessie, is cited frequently as a victim of Wright's negative portrayals of black women. From the moment she appears, she is cast as stereotypically dependent and insecure, having 'waited around' for Bigger to come see her, asking what delayed him, and pouting jealously at having spotted him out with white people – particularly, white women – while ignoring her. This poor representation of black women is only exacerbated by Bigger's sweet talk in the scene, manifest in his continued reference to Bessie as "baby" and the ease with which he gradually softens her demeanor. She is made to look weak-willed and easily duped.

Sample 2 – excerpt from an article written for Free Press Houston

"We can't survive....on \$7.25!" – "Strike!...strike!....strike!..." — "No Burgers – No Fries – Make Our Wages Supersized!"

On Thursday, December 4th, I took part in Fight for 15's national action to raise the minimum wage and demand union rights for fast food workers. The event was just one of many protests I have attended in the Houston area over the past few years—all of them important causes, most of them life-or-death matters.

Unfortunately, few people understand that raising the minimum wage is a life-or-death matter; instead, most view it as either helpful to income or, at worst, an audacious demand of undeserving people.

Yet, at this protest, the participants – most of them fast-food workers themselves – chanted not just with passion but pain. One woman's roaring cry, "***We can't survive...on \$7.25!***" — was deeply anguished as if in physical agony.

The Fight for 15 *is* a life-or-death matter.

Two rallies were held – one at the Burger King at Westheimer and Montrose, and another beginning at Anderson Park near the corner of Richmond and Chimney Rock.

I attended the latter, which began at 11:30 a.m. Protesters marched for several blocks, starting at the park and making our way to a nearby Taco Bell, then Burger King, stopping occasionally to listen to local leaders exhort the crowd with inspirational words of brotherhood, perseverance, and solidarity.

Attendees shared their grievances and vehemently stressed what was at stake.

“It is a shame,” said Alvaro Rodriguez of the Communist Party in Houston, “that in Houston, one of the richest cities in the world with a large concentration of wealthy people, 1 in 4 Houstonians live below the poverty line. This inequality also has a racist edge, with 1 in 3 African Americans and Hispanics living below the official poverty level. We can help our economy by increasing consumer demand through higher wages.”

Lone Star College student, Brant Roberts, said, “I’m here because I’ve worked many low wage jobs in my lifetime and I’m tired of struggling just to survive, despite the fact that I work full time.”

Sample 3—excerpts summarizing two academic articles about African American men in college. APA format is used for bibliographic entries.

Cuyjet, M.J. (1997). African American men on college campuses: Their needs and their perceptions. In M.J. Cuyjet (Ed.), *Helping African American men succeed in college* (pp. 5-16). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Cuyjet compares the ratio of black male to black female college students, showing how it is remarkably low at 38 to 62 percent, compared with other ethnic groups, like Asians (49 to 51 percent), Hispanics (44 to 56 percent), and Whites (45 to 55 percent). He suggests that this has far-reaching social and employment implications, including fewer dating options for black females and continued economic problems for black males. Cuyjet’s explanations for low black male college enrollment are high rates of incarceration, disproportionate high school dropout rates, high rates of homicide, and serious health problems, such as black males having higher rates of cancer than any other group in the U.S. Black males are also disadvantaged by attending poorer elementary and middle schools, adults not encouraging their academic achievement, and financial hardships that limit their success.

Cuyjet believes student affairs professionals need to better understand the distinct needs of black males. One need is a non-threatening, nurturing environment. A second need is to be viewed less stereotypically and negatively by peers and society. In many cases, black males themselves need to be disabused of self-perceptions that they are more threatening and less intelligent than others. Cuyjet emphasizes that methods and materials used to gain a better understanding of black males need not be dramatically different from those used to evaluate other groups of students, like white males; they need only to be adapted as appropriate. Furthermore, it is necessary to evaluate black males in a way distinct from black females, as their personal development differs. Black males strive for masculinity, financial success, and

determination of personal values. They also have starkly different levels of college-preparedness and academic habits from black females, such as not as often taking detailed notes, highlighting important information in readings, or revising papers two or more times before submission. Instead, black males spend a disproportionate amount of time at their schools' recreational and sports facilities. Another salient consideration is that black males less frequently seek out confidantes when they have personal problems. Cuyjet believes that to create a safer and more nurturing environment for black males, it is necessary to provide an atmosphere in which high-quality relationships develop and personal interactions occur, which could in turn make African American men feel less marginalized.

Cuyjet, M.J. (2006). African American college men: Twenty-first century issues and concerns. In M.J. Cuyjet & Associates (Eds.), *African American men in college* (pp. 3-23). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Cuyjet observes the relative absence of African American men in college, noting that the ratio of African American men to African American women is the lowest of any ethnic/racial group. He believes it is important to explore what impact this has on various elements of communities across the nation and society. Cuyjet further suggests that institutions of higher education, in their student service efforts, too often regard black males and females as a monolith, when their experiences and needs are very different. Cuyjet offers various explanations as to why so few young black men attend college, including the fact that many are sentenced to prison while in high school or shortly after. They are also more often put in behavior disorder classrooms in K through 12 that mark them de facto as outcasts. Cuyjet points out that the low numbers of black males in college have serious dating and relationship implications for black females, many of whom would prefer to have black partners but are forced, because of lack of regular contact with black males, as well as a natural inclination to date educational equals, to seek partners of other races.

Cuyjet believes colleges need to do more to encourage black males who *are* on college campuses to seek success academically – including more detailed notetaking, taking advantage of tutoring services, etc. – rather than purely as athletes, which is the current trend. Universities must be mindful of the ways in which some black males have subconsciously internalized the social stigma that they are not intellectual and meant instead for physical activity. Cuyjet also makes the salient point that young black males often adopt “cool pose” on college campuses to compensate for lack of political and cultural power. Deprived of easy access to more traditional markers of masculinity (economic success, traditional civic involvement, head-of-household status), they mark their manliness with a demeanor of toughness, lack of fear, and stoicism. This seeming strength should not, however, be a reason for those in student affairs to think black male college students do not have unique, unspoken needs. It is their job to help black males succeed and to ensure their comfort and sense of belonging.

Sample 4 – a discussion board post on Greek Philosophy

For a long time in Greek culture, the religious traditions and beliefs of Homer and Hesiod were of great importance. Around 600 BCE, however, modes of thought that scoffed at religion began to emerge. Greek thinkers, instead of basing everything on religion, gods, authority, dogma, myth, and superstition,

began to employ more *reason*, which gave birth to rational philosophy to explain the world and human experience.

Greek philosophy is segmented into the Pre-Socratic period and Classical Greek Philosophy (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle). The former was not characterized by a single philosophy but a general examination of the world and human experience from a scientific perspective, using logic, math, and theoretical reasoning. Thinkers' explanations for nature and natural catastrophes did not focus on gods' interventions and whims but instead on elements in nature like water, air, fire, etc., or the desires and actions of humans. Theorists like Pythagoras believed mathematical principles explained much of the universe. There were also the Dualists, who believed, by contrast to Pythagora's idea of universal harmony, that there were two universes: one was the constantly changing world around us; the other was the perfect world of the intellect.

Later, the Sophists took great pride in being able to discuss a variety of topics effectively, and Greek philosophy at that time focused on the power of persuasion and rhetoric. Socrates, the most well-known Greek philosopher, took on questions of moral and psychological significance, such as "what is virtue?" "what is patriotism?" "what is morality?" Later, Socrates' student, Plato, would put forth a theory that we cannot know justice, beauty, virtue, or goodness without having known them in a prior existence. His student, Aristotle, later became ensconced in logic.

Philosophy impacted Greek culture, helping to facilitate an environment in which people challenged authority, questioned traditions, and reprimanded prejudices. Since some philosophers put their lives on the line to express theories and to teach others the wisdom of their thoughts, they simultaneously introduced to Greek culture the practice of protest and passion for social issues. Later Greek philosophy would place greater emphasis on the individual than on politics. This too had an impact, as it gave people permission to introspect. It would also help reinforce new politics in Greece in which democracy replaced an older order of aristocratic authority and dominance. The Sophists, particularly, were instrumental in providing the education needed in a new political order.

Generally, philosophy offered Greek culture the notion that problems could be looked at and solved in a multitude of ways; therefore, it very much enriched Greek culture.

Sample 5 – an excerpt from a personal narrative

Hanging out with Ehsan was tantamount to being in a Woody Allen movie, with the arguably small distinction that he was neurotic not just about himself, but friends as well, and his neurosis rarely manifested as true self-critique, although he could easily point out *your* flaws. I had long been, myself, decidedly over-thinking, especially when it came to my romantic relationships, but I liked to think my spells of anxiety were episodic and relatively mild, at least outwardly, whereas for Ehsan, it was the inescapable essence of his personality, something one could detect within minutes.

We didn't so much socialize as friends as we figuratively walked down a New York City sidewalk, with him interrupting my every statement to animatedly declare what my problem, questionable choice, or unfortunate attribute was. To his credit, he usually spun this in a way

more flattering than not. (“Your problem is that you are fiercely tenacious. You love *intensely*. You hold on too tightly to partners even though you know it’s not right.”)

For a long time, he was my only true guy friend. We shared one-on-one coffee outings, private phone conversations, and walks in the park. I’d known him since my days with Kfir; he’d been one of several medical students in our social circle. Brendan and Will, two others, seemed to appreciate me well enough, but Ehsan truly embraced me with regular social invites, group chats, and private messages. He stayed in touch even while completing his residency in San Diego, whereas Brendan’s and Will’s respective moves out of Texas put them well off my radar.

By the time Ehsan was back in Houston, he was a bit more laid-back and less awkward than he had been pre-residency when everything that came out of his mouth was math, science, or computer programming. Now, transformed from living it up with the in-crowd at Scripps Mercy Hospital San Diego, he might occasionally let a little profanity fly and nurse a beer, at least for show, instead of water. He appeared a bit 90s grunge at times, with untucked t-shirts worn under plaid, light flannel button-downs.

I still sensed in him, however, an undeniable air of elitism when it came to which women appealed to him and to whom to make overtures. The type who, instead of falling for a woman on visceral emotion or a natural affinity for her personality, had a mental list of physical, personal, and lifestyle traits that needed to be checked off. Would woman-in-question reflect well on him? Was she tall? Had she read a lot of books? Did she go to an Ivy League college? Did she speak more than one language? Had she traveled to Europe?

Ehsan wore wire-framed glasses, stood only 5’6”, and wasn’t particularly magnetic or charming, but he had annoyingly high self-esteem, largely fed by his self-perception as a Renaissance man. He wasn’t just an anatomical mechanic with special knowledge of obscure diseases and illnesses but one who dived in *art*, à la William Carlos Williams – beautiful drawings of people and trees and such – and was now learning to play the ukulele. Little did he know that I, who had undertaken a liberal arts undergraduate and graduate education, thought his artistic endeavors were less than impressive; he could use much tutelage in actual *ideas*.

We didn’t spend a lot of time together in the first year of his return. I was in a relationship with Gregor at the time, and he was seeing an Asian girl named Lexi. Eventually, we were both single again and reeling from our losses. It was prime time for commiserating with joint neurosis.

We had circled the hiking trail at Memorial Park twice, with Ehsan occasionally pointing out colors of different birds, their defense mechanisms, and where they flew for the winter, and were now going around a third time. He was ruminating about Lexi, just as he’d done the last time we hung out and the time before that.

Per his Facebook stalking, she’d been hanging out with a lot of white guys with handsome smirks who were taller and cooler than him. I’d seen some of her pics – her and a young Jason Priestley-looking guy cascading, bodies entwined in bathing-suit-clad youthful glory, down a bright yellow water slide. Another of her riding piggyback on a light-skinned black guy’s back and kissing his cheek with delight. Worse, she’d gotten into modeling, posting album after album of herself in lascivious or otherwise edgy-hot poses. It was hard to believe

that the very plain, even somewhat homely-looking girl I'd met at a museum exhibit about six months before was the same vixen who lay – dead-looking and eerily provocative – on a dirt ground in a wedding dress, red lips pouting, netted veil covering her eyes, arms holding at belly-level a bouquet of flowers.