Lifting the Color Curtain with the Clemente Course in the Humanities

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In Worcester, Massachusetts, as academic director and poetry instructor of the local branch of the Bard College Clemente Course in the Humanities, a program providing low-income adults with a multidisciplinary course of study in the liberal arts, I work with diverse cohorts of learners, planning a curriculum staging core elements of the humanistic tradition for a representative cross-section of humankind. Over eight months and one hundred and ten contact hours, students complete coursework in US history, art history, critical thinking and writing, literature, and philosophy. Books, childcare, tuition, and transportation are provided free of charge, and students are eligible to earn up to six college credits for their efforts in the course. We are funded and supported by a combination of organizations and institutions, from commonwealth benefactors like Mass Humanities to private foundations such as the Alden Trust, and colleges and universities, including Anna Maria College, Bard College, Becker College, Assumption College, Clark University, the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester State University, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI). Other partners include local arts and culture institutions such as the Worcester Art Museum, the Worcester County Poetry Association, and the Worcester Cultural Council, as well as community centers, non-profits, and social service organizations like Ex-Prisoners and Prisoners Organizing for Community Advancement (EPOCA), the Worcester Community Action Council, and Worcester Interfaith.

For Earl Shorris, who founded the Clemente Course in the Humanities in New York City in the 1990s, the aim of the course was “to bring the stu-
udents into the public world, to take them from the isolation of poverty to the political life of citizens” (118). Over the last two decades, even as the public sphere has shifted toward increasingly virtualized discourses through remediations transforming popular notions of the social, and even while the educational marketplace has shifted increasingly toward online and hybrid modes of delivery, the dozens of Clemente Courses that have emerged around the country have remained dedicated to face-to-face encounters built around the public consequences of humanistic inquiry. If large portions of twenty-first-century scholarship in the humanities happen in closed quarters, on screens, in forms largely distributed by, for, from, and to stakeholders at increasingly privatized institutions, then Clemente represents a space where the humanities still happen by, for, from, and to the public.

Designed around the so-called Western canon as a point of departure toward engaged citizenship, we enlarge that canon in Worcester since we work with particularly diverse cohorts. Such diversity has been encoded into Worcester’s urban fabric for generations. The Worcester Regional Research Bureau emphasizes the immigrant dimension of Worcester’s diversity, describing it as “a Massachusetts ‘Gateway City,’” which “has welcomed residents from diverse backgrounds for decades.” But whereas, “prior to 1950, most new residents were born in or descended from European countries . . . since 1950, the city began to attract greater numbers of residents from South America, Africa, and Asia” (“Changing City” 1). Meanwhile, in recent years, Massachusetts has welcomed over two thousand refugees per year, with Worcester welcoming more than twice as many as any other city in the commonwealth, serving as one of the most important places of refuge on the eastern seaboard.

In other parts of the commonwealth, and around the country, many branches of the Clemente Course serve specific city neighborhoods, or, narrower, more homogenous demographics, as for example in Dorchester, on the one hand, or in Springfield, on the other. Meanwhile, in Worcester, we serve all corners of the city, bringing together students and instructors who hail from the four corners of the world. Consider figures 1 and 2, featuring a conversation in a typical Clemente session involving participants with individual or familial roots in Algeria, Italy, Jamaica, Kenya, Liberia, Paraguay, and Trinidad. On this evening, we were reading *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, an ancient text from Mesopotamia re-discovered in the late nineteenth century after two millennia of obscurity, and only recently anthologized in earnest as a centerpiece of world literature.
Figure 1. Poetry session on *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, February 25, 2016. *Source*: Hannah Coombs.

Figure 2. The Bard College Clemente Course in the Humanities, Worcester, Massachusetts. *Source*: Hannah Coombs.
In his 1979 lectures on *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gregory Corso held that “we're all Gilgameshes,” but some of our Clemente students don’t see it that way. Although many engage primarily with the character of Gilgamesh, as the epic itself and most of its contemporary readers have done, other students pay equal attention to Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and still others find themselves identifying more decisively with Enkidu, coming, as they do, from the social margins and the underclass. Met with Corso’s argument that “we're all Gilgameshes,” and considering the universal appeal of the titular hero, one student in this year’s course whispered, not quite under her breath: “No, we’re all Enkidus.” Such articulations of class solidarity have been relatively rare among Worcester Clemente cohorts, where students have generally proven quicker to address points of difference constellating around gender, national origin, racialization, religion, and sexuality than to confront their common socioeconomic disadvantage.

Initially this surprised me; now I see it as a revealing symptom of the broader twenty-first-century US aversion to frank discussions about class conflict and social stratification. In fact, Clemente instructors, by their mere presence, can sometimes stand as a bar to such discussions. I have a distinct sense that one of the best conversations at the intersection of classed, gendered, and racialized identity occurred precisely because it unfolded in my absence: we were considering a passage from Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), and one of the students explained that it would be easier to discuss the stakes of the passage if I was not in the room. Without missing a beat, I excused myself, explaining that I would be back in ten minutes. When I returned, one of our elder students, a pastor, originally from Liberia, appeared to be moderating a pitched discussion involving differential access to representation in legal matters, which had somehow circled back to an earlier dialogue in our philosophy strand involving Immanuel Kant. I did not inquire as to the arc of what I had missed, and we moved on to the next poem. One lesson here would seem to be that differently configured publics will produce different kinds of conversations and dialogues, resulting in different kinds of action and different kinds of scholarship.

In his apology *The Western Canon* (1994), Harold Bloom defined and defended the canon as “the choice of books in our teaching institutions,” even while conceding that “reading the very best writers—let us say Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Tolstoy—is not going to make us better citizens” (15–16). Perhaps not, though choosing books with attention to literary tradition
contemporary communities gives us a better chance, while extending beyond mere reading and into conversation and dialogue among citizens and noncitizens improves our chances further still. Over the course of an academic year in Clemente, in the midst of working from Socrates and Sophocles to a range of modern painters, philosophers, and poets, we consider several figures who have come from the social margins and the underclass, including Richard Wright (1908–60), often hailed among the most accomplished African American authors of the twentieth century. Celebrated for his debut novel *Native Son* (1940) and his memoir *Black Boy* (1945), Wright’s literary career evolved in other directions in the 1950s, during a period of exile in France, when he travelled widely across Europe, Africa, and Asia, turning from fiction to poetry and reportage. In 1955, Wright visited Bandung, in Indonesia, where leaders from emerging nations in Africa and Asia gathered to determine their collective future. Wright wrote about this experience in *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (1956), reflecting on the racially charged atmosphere at the first gathering of representatives from a set of newly independent African and Asian nations.

During his remaining few years, particularly in work finally collected four decades later in *Haiku: This Other World* (1998), Wright pursued an aesthetic standpoint more closely aligned to African and Asian than to American or European thought. While Wright’s turn to haiku can be understood as a mimicry of European American writers like Jack Kerouac, who had been drawn to Japanese forms in the immediate wake of the US occupation of Japan, it can also be seen as a separate errand that flowed from his journey to Indonesia. If, for Sachi Nakachi, Wright’s haiku stand as “a product of his colonial ambivalence” (159) and “a Western application of an Asian literary form” (160), they also register as a product of anticolonial solidarity: a shift by an African diasporic away from European and American literary forms occasioned by extended exposure to African and Asian ways of life.

Wright first learned of Bandung while living in exile in northern France, where he recalled reading in a newspaper of “twenty-nine free and independent nations of Asia and Africa” that were “meeting in Bandung, Indonesia to discuss ‘racialism and colonialism’” (Color 11). For Wright, this was not a gathering of special interests but rather “a meeting of almost all of the human race living in the main geopolitical center of gravity of the earth” (12). Taking place apart from and beyond European and American power...
structures, Wright concluded that this “meeting of the rejected” was “in itself a kind of judgment upon that Western world” (12) insofar as “the agenda and subject matter had been written for centuries in the blood and bones of the participants” (14). There is a sense in which our Worcester Clemente sessions, too, constitute a “meeting of the rejected”: a dynamic that becomes particularly palpable in our US history sessions, where “the blood and bones of our participants” (12) matter deeply to the arc of our discussions.

These discussions aren’t always easy, for a mix of philosophical and pragmatic reasons. We always see things from different perspectives, and we sometimes struggle to make those differences plain to one another. Nevertheless, we do our best to deal with communication challenges mirroring those that Wright foresaw at Bandung, where he anticipated that “the English language was about to undergo one of the most severe tests in its long and glorious history” (Color 200). Poised as English was to become “the common, dominant tongue of the globe,” it followed for Wright that “soon there would be more people speaking English than there were people whose native tongue was English” (200). In Worcester Clemente, this ratio does not always pertain, but on some nights it does, with many struggling more decidedly to formulate sentences in their second, third, or fourth language of English than they do to formulate ideas in their first language, which may not be comprehended by anyone else in the room.

Whether their expressive English ensures active participation from the start or limits their contributions until midyear or later, Clemente students in Worcester enter with baseline standards of receptive English and receive broad exposure across the pillars of the so-called Western canon. However, they also gain awareness of materials extending beyond that tradition and consider these in counterpoint, whether measuring the Parthenon against the Pyramid of Djoser and the Great Zimbabwe or the sonnets of William Shakespeare and Philip Sidney against those of Wanda Coleman and Terrance Hayes. In the process of encountering such works, they encounter each other, with interpretations of artistic, historical, literary, and philosophical narratives verging into narratives of their respective lives. Both kinds of work are salutary. “We have to write our own stories,” Vicky Mireles, a 2015 graduate, argued in one of our class sessions, “and our own histories. No one is going to write them for us. You’re never going to find these things in the books” (Mireles). What our students do find in the books speaks volumes about the books and the students alike. Yes, we read and
write on the classics, and on counterpoints to the classics, but we also read and write each other.

Books figure into our work, but we ourselves figure into our work just as centrally—in a work that also includes many other kinds of texts. Our classes are held in the Worcester Art Museum, which allows our art history instructor to conduct multiple gallery tours throughout the academic year. Moreover, our proximity to the American Antiquarian Society (AAS) ensures that Clemente students are able to engage material from an unrivaled archive of early US print culture whose broadsides, manuscripts, newspapers, and other print materials read quite differently among this cohort than among the general run of AAS fellows, members, and patrons. With this background to draw upon, Clemente students can better appreciate Wright’s haiku not only as a publishing phenomenon but also as an archival phenomenon, for among the four thousand haiku Wright wrote in the last eighteen months of his life, very few made it into print over the next four decades. In fact, three thousand of them remain unpublished still, confined to manuscripts held in the Beinecke Library at Yale University.

Like all texts, books speak differently to different students. On the occasion of his September 2016 public reading at WPI and his appearance at the first Worcester Clemente session of the academic year, the words and works of visiting poet Martín Espada resonated especially strongly with our Puerto Rican students but also appealed to those who had experience with the legal system. It is one thing to speak about rights in the abstract, or, even more particularly, with respect to the arguments of John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx, and quite another to consider them in view of a personal narrative such as Espada’s poem “Mariano Explains Yanqui Colonialism to Judge Collings.” While my WPI students might struggle collectively to explain the relationship between Mariano’s “¡Pa’l carajo!” and the interpreter’s “yes” (Alabanza 45), my Clemente students collectively read this short poem across multiple registers, from English to Spanish and from the logics of the courtroom to the logics of mass incarceration. Meanwhile, Espada’s poem “Return” touched a nerve with one of our Brooklyn-born students, linking poet and listener alike to “the dim angel of public housing” (Republic 45)—a phenomenon that could by appreciated if not wholly understood by those of us who spoke without Brooklyn accents.

In the following September, when Naomi Shihab Nye held a public conversation at the Worcester Art Museum and made an appearance at the first Worcester Clemente session of the academic year, she shared poems not
only by her own hand but also by the hand of her late father, Aziz Shihab, himself a Palestinian refugee who had left unpublished work behind in his notebooks. In one of those poems, “Many Asked Me Not to Forget Them,” Shihab asks, “How much do I think of Africa?” before expressing his sadness over “places I didn’t / have enough energy to worry about” (33). Looking around the room, our students recognized Shihab through his daughter's channeling, seeing in each other people who had also been forgotten, and who came from places many lacked energy to worry about.

As a public, the Worcester Clemente cohorts emerge from specific—and profoundly complex—class positions, but also from specific—and profoundly complex—geographies. In this regard they reflect their city, whether Worcester is for them a place of recent arrival, long residence, or multigenerational affiliation. In an annual session on Worcester poets, where we invariably read Elizabeth Bishop’s signature Worcester poem “In the Waiting Room” alongside other local landmark poems from Stanley Kunitz’s “The Portrait” and Charles Olson’s “The Thing Was Moving” to Diana Der-Hovanessian’s “Hometown” and Christopher Gilbert’s “Now,” students are consistently captivated by works deeply embedded in the fabric of the city. The poems are hyperlocal in their references, invoking dentist’s offices, football stadiums, neighborhoods, parks, restaurants, and surrounding towns that conjure strong associations. In 2015, we were joined at this session on Worcester poets by Cheryl Savageau, a writer of Abenaki and French Canadian background whose kinship to Worcester and to the Native histories of the region helped our students rethink their mental maps of city and nation alike. In her poem “Looking for Indians,” Savageau reframes New England from an Indigenous perspective, while “Department of Labor Haiku,” with its “winter snow” and its “men out of work” (53), links to Wright’s work and to our ongoing dialogue about class positions and social identities. With Savageau in the room, we considered the more impersonal trajectories of industrialization and post-industrialization through discussions of labor that simultaneously intersected with gendered and racialized dynamics.

In 2016, in conjunction with the session on Worcester poets, and together with the sponsorship of the Worcester County Poetry Association, we held a reunion reading of the Worcester’s Free People’s Workshop, active in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in honor of its late convener, Etheridge Knight, and Christopher Gilbert, his sometime deputy, which featured readings and reminiscences by John Hodgen, Cheryl Savageau, and David
Williams. How astonished Williams was to arrive early to the event, held at the Worcester Public Library, only to encounter a group of twenty-odd strangers discussing his poem “Breath”! As he entered the room, Clemente students were trying to discern the nature of the poem’s speaker, descended from people “thrown away / as if they were nothing” (5). Williams has Lebanese descent lines, but most students weren’t aware of this biographical detail before he emerged among them, nor did they realize that the poet himself was hovering at the edge of their conversation. While some of those born in the United States wanted to locate his work in the deeper histories of transatlantic enslavement, more recent immigrants to the United States preferred to read the poem in connection with a broader and more contemporary set of experiences marking the exile and the refugee. And there was Williams, listening to the churn of both readings.

Here was an example of literary criticism in public, en route to scholarship as manifested in student essays and in this chapter alike. But what makes such public work scholarship, and what makes this scholarship public? By Timothy K. Eatman’s definition, public scholarship manifests itself in “scholarly or creative activity that joins serious intellectual endeavor with a commitment to public practice and public consequence” (18). In the Worcester branch of the Bard College Clemente Course in the Humanities, this activity produces faculty and student intellectuals in the mold that Julie Ellison describes as the “positional humanist,” poised to “mediate between one place and another and between one kind of practice and another” (294). These mediations occur constantly in Clemente: between ancient Mesopotamia and contemporary United States; between neighborhoods and between continents; between oral and written testimonies; between personal narratives and argumentative essays, all of which pivot back to the practices of our students, in view of the consequences that such work entails.

Whether casual reader, college student, or professional scholar, it is one thing to consider a literary work in solitude—or as close to solitude as we might come in such individual acts of reading—and quite another to do so in company. I have touched elsewhere on the dynamic of spatialized collective reading in my chapter “Dutchman in the Round,” which elaborates my teaching practices connected to Amiri Baraka’s Dutchman (1964), where I emphasize the virtues of “turning the classroom into a theatrical space where instructor and students are interpellated on a pedagogical stage” (34). In Worcester Clemente, as at WPI, my classroom conversations and
dialogues tend to unfold in circles, but even when there is no one performing in the middle of that circle, everyone is performing at its perimeter, for we perform our readings for each other, to each other, with each other in mind. Think, for example, of Bishop’s lines from “In the Waiting Room”: “you are one of *them* / Why should you be one, too?” (150). The speaker in this poem, at once six and sixty-five, asks these questions to herself, as does the reader who considers them privately and silently. But to read these words aloud in company is another matter entirely.

For this reason, whatever the company, I always prefer that short poems—and, at the very least, selected lines from longer poems—be read aloud more than once, on the conviction that any public will give different kinds of hearings to different kinds of speakers. Here, I point not only to the fictive speaker that separates herself from the poet on paper, but also to the human speaker that gives that fiction a voice in the company of a classroom. What kind of company? How do listeners affiliate or disaffiliate from the various speakers that emerge therein? “You are one of *them* / Why should you be one, too?”: as I listen to and speak these lines again each year with a new group of Worcester Clemente students, they raise questions about the pronouns we use to invoke, affiliate with, and distance ourselves from one another. Why me, or us, apart from *them*? Why with *them*? Why not? And for what reasons? Bishop’s lines can be activated along the axes of class, gender, nationality, and race, among others: for some of our students, they resonate in all of these keys, and beyond.

Bishop, like many of our students, spanned various locales across the Americas in her life, but our students tend to come in equal numbers from the African and Asian diasporas. As such, our program connects to students from initiatives that include the Higgins School of Humanities at Clark University and the Latino Education Institute of Worcester State University, as well as to key members of local non-profit and social services organizations such as the African Community Education Program and the Southeast Asian Coalition. Because Worcester, as the second largest city in New England, at just under two hundred thousand residents, is large enough to foster an array of partnering entities and initiatives but small enough that constituents from said partners might come together under one roof, we have resisted hitching our star too closely to any one of them. We receive faculty stipends and other operating funds from arts and culture enterprises, colleges and universities, and local foundations. We receive neighborhood spaces in which to hold class sessions, community dinners,
commencement ceremonies, and other outreach activities from churches, libraries, and museums. We receive student referrals and support services from commonwealth, federal, and private charities and cultural affinity groups. We would not flourish to the extent that we do if we lacked support from any one of these key partners.

Taken together, in all of their diversities, our annual cohorts comprise a series of miniature Bandung Conferences of their very own. In coming together to contemplate their relationship to US citizenship, or the lack thereof, students and instructors in the Worcester Clemente Course also come together to contemplate their relationship to the wider world, much as leaders like Zhou Enlai of China, Sukarno of Indonesia, and Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt came together at Bandung in 1955 to contemplate their respective national interests in the context of the wider world. If Wright took it upon himself to contemplate the consequences of the Bandung Conference, then our respective iterations of Bandung take it upon ourselves to contemplate not only the consequences of works by writers like Wright, but also the consequences of our collective contemplation itself. In this regard, teaching Wright in the Worcester Clemente classroom allowed me to see his work in ways that were not nearly as apparent in my WPI classrooms, which have relatively high percentages of international students by some metrics, though certainly not in comparison with Worcester Clemente cohorts. In both cases, I prepared to teach Wright’s work with reference to the poems themselves and to the scholarly conversation about them; in the context of Worcester Clemente, I returned to said poems and to said scholarly conversation with an enhanced sense of the poem’s audiences and contexts, which is to say, the poem’s publics.

Wright’s turn to haiku in the final years of his life is sometimes read as an isolated aesthetic decision but can also be read as part of a larger shift toward Asian cultural forms. This shift also marked the late work of UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, whose posthumously published memoir *Markings* (1963) was written in his first language, Norwegian, taking the form of a prose narrative interspersed with a series of haiku. Wright’s turn to haiku also bespeaks a realignment of African American culture toward Asia in the second half of the twentieth century. This shift was routed in part through the catalyzing influence of Baraka. As Michio Arimitsu observes, Baraka’s poetic allusions to Asia “symptomatically revealed the deep psychological conflicts about his own marginalized racial identity while complicating the black-and-white dichotomy of race relations in the
United States” (81). For Baraka, the shift came early as late, from his collaboration with Hettie Jones on the co-edited journal Yügen: A New Consciousness in Arts and Letters (1958–62) to his late experiments in Un Poco Low Coup (2003), which inflected Japanese precedents through the jazz influence of Bud Powell in order to produce the “low coup,” an American form mutually indebted to Africa and Asia. Following Wright and Baraka, several other Black poets have prevailed upon Japanese forms such as the haiku and the tanka. In 1985, Etheridge Knight published a series of “Black Man Haiku,” which remain uncollected; more recently, there are the examples of Sonia Sanchez’s Morning Haiku (2010) and Harryette Mullen’s Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary (2013).

Wright’s Haiku: This Other World begins with a poem that may well be his most important haiku of all:

I am nobody:
A red sinking autumn sun
Took my name away. (1)

This printed instance departs from two earlier printed instances of the poem, all three of them posthumous. The first instance, printed in an Ebony feature of 1961, shortly after Wright’s death, reads:

I am nobody
A red sinking Autumn sun
Took my name away (Harrington 92)

The second instance, printed in 1978, offers the same version, except for the minor restyling of “Autumn” as “autumn” (Richard Wright Reader 253). The changes to this poem made in Haiku: This Other World might appear largely cosmetic, involving matters of lineation with respect to the margin, on the one hand, and details involving punctuation, on the other. Yet the lineation helps to temporalize the lines in relation to one another, locating “a red sinking autumn sun” at an earlier point, while the punctuation reinforces the poem’s causal relationship, with the colon underscoring the cause-and-effect relationship between the poem’s first lines and its last two lines.

Asking “Can Black Art Ever Escape the Politics of Race?” Vinson Cunningham recently held up Wright’s haiku as an example in the affirmative, arguing that they focus not on politics or race, but rather on “the sublimity
of nature, the ultimate momentariness of human life, the tenuous and uncountable associations that hang between phenomenon and perception” (Cunningham). While a phenomenological reading of Wright is certainly possible, Worcester Clemente students tend to read Wright’s “I am nobody” not as a nature poem but rather as a comment on enslavement, placing adjectives like “red,” “sinking,” and “autumn” within the space of the middle passage. I take their readings as a refinement of Wright scholar Yoshinbou Hakutani’s assertion that this poem “suppresses subjectivity by depicting the red sun that erases his name” (141). In fact, the name isn’t erased but rather taken away, in an appropriation that does not look to efface but rather to exploit. It is not the poem that suppresses Wright’s subjectivity but rather the historical conditions that occasioned the poem. Hakutani proceeds to argue that “the poet is strongly present, even by negation” (141): more specifically, a negation structured by the shadow of a stolen name. While I could pass off this engagement with Hakutani’s reading as my own literary analysis, it represents a strand of my scholarly activity that could only have emerged in community, and in public.

As my Clemente students have helped me to understand, this haiku’s muga (無我), or non-selfhood, paradoxically emerges through the predicament of Black subjectivity in exile. Wright—for we cannot yet call him by another name in the absence of the one that has been stolen—subtly contends with the legacies of enslavement from a transatlantic vantage point. In their afterword to Wright’s Haiku: This Other World, coeditors Hakutani and Robert L. Tener style the setting of this poem as “a vague place in autumn” (277), but a considered biographical and historical reading can posit a more precise location for the poem and the poet—namely, in Normandy, looking westward across the Atlantic, where Wright re-enacts the trajectory of the middle passage by following the trace of the sun. If, for Lucien Stryk, a haiku’s muga activates “so close an identification with the things one writes of that the self is forgotten” (16), then, for Wright, the self is not so much forgotten, but rather found as lost, at once asserted and negated. The pathos of this plight emerges in a sunset recalling the path of those forbears reduced from personhood to thinghood by their enslavers. In elliptically recalling those humans who were rendered as things, Wright’s person simultaneously emerges even as it finds itself resubmerged.

The kigo (季語), or seasonal reference, also bespeaks the legacies of enslavement, with Wright’s “red sinking autumn sun” pointing not only to the western horizon but also to the Western harvest, whose origins center
upon plantation economies enabled and fueled by the enormous exploitation of the enslaved. As Sachi Nakachi argues, Wright’s self-representation as “nobody” belied his literary celebrity, minimized here by his implicit identification with “the thousands of nameless Africans who sank in the bottom of the Middle Passage while a red autumn sun beamed overhead, or those slaves who had to work relentlessly while a ‘red autumn sun’ sank into the West.” (179–80). Such identifications had structured Wright’s work since 12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States (1941), a collaboration with photographer Edwin Rosskam. Wright began this work by writing that “each day when you see us Black folk upon the dusty land of the farms or upon the hard pavement of the city streets, you usually take us for granted and think you know us, but our history is far stranger than you suspect, and we are not what we seem” (10). So, too, with Wright’s late haiku, easily taken for granted and thought known but far stranger than one might suspect. The strange history of Black folk might seem absent from these brief poems, but Blackness stands as the very ground on which Wright’s Japanesque figures have been written.

When read in isolation, a dislocated and unattributed phrase like “red sinking autumn sun” might carry a melancholic tone seeming primarily seasonal in its affective impact. However, when read in the context of this poem, the set of poems from which this poem springs, and the life and work of the poet who wrote it, the phrase emerges as a powerful instance of the Black signifier, a string of “words with demonstrably African American referents” (Cocola, “Multimodal Encounter” 140). Though not as direct as proper names such as Langston Hughes’s “Harlem” or Maya Angelou’s “Killens,” Wright’s “red sinking autumn sun” offers an implicit gloss on African American history nevertheless, even as it points to the circumstances of a Japanese empire in eclipse.

I’m not sure I would have made the connection outside of an multidisciplinary teaching opportunity devoted to parallel forms of inquiry in art history and in poetry, but I have been struck by the fact that Wright’s “red sinking autumn sun” also converges with the red sinking autumn sun of J. M. W. Turner’s painting Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On (1840), more recently known as The Slave Ship (see figure 3). Turner’s painting depicts the Zong massacre of November 1781, when, en route from Liverpool to the Caribbean, running low on provisions, a British crew massacred over one hundred enslaved men, women, and children and threw them overboard with the intention of collecting
insurance claims upon arrival in Jamaica. Here, as in Wright's poem, we have ample evidence of the sunset, together with more oblique suggestions of the enslaved and massacred. Turner himself, also a poet, had evoked the massacre as early as 1812, in his poem “Fallacies of Hope,” setting the event amid “angry setting suns and fierce-edged clouds” (Finberg 474). Elsewhere, the most sustained literary treatment of this event, Tobagonian Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Phillip's fragmentary, book-length work ZONG! (2011), relies on the atomization, blurring, and deferral of language in the telling, offering its own hauntingly and inevitably elusive account of transatlantic enslavement through the prism of the Zong massacre.

Tracing this literary history to its root, in what can be understood as a crucial catalyzing event for the movements and works that followed from it, Olaudah Equiano brought the matter of the Zong massacre to the attention of Granville Sharp, one of the most active British abolitionists of the eighteenth century, leading Sharp to articulate “the Necessity of putting an entire stop to the Slave Trade” (qtd. in Faubert 1). Though I had read
Equiano and Philip, and though I had seen Turner’s painting, I did not route all of these intertexts through Wright’s haiku until reading it in the company of Clemente students from Ghana, Liberia, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United States, who put pressure on—and prompted me to put a different kind of pressure on—every single one of the dozen words in the poem.

Red. Sinking. Autumn. Sun. Upon further reflection, I see in “red” and “sinking” not only the characteristics of the sun, but also the lineaments of the enslaved, massacred, and drowned, in Turner’s brushstrokes and Wright’s language alike. Thanks to the insights of Clemente students, I recognize the omissions that mark Turner’s painting and the poems by Wright and Philip, where so much of what remains undepicted stands at the very center of the matter. “Perspective,” Wright argued in his early essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937), “is that part of a poem, novel, or play which a writer never puts directly upon paper” (Richard Wright Reader 45). While reading Wright’s work more carefully and thoroughly has helped me to discern elements of that perspective, doing so in the company of Clemente students—working as and working among fellow positional humanists—has also been crucial to these efforts.

Thanks to Clemente students, I also recognize that Wright’s poem isn’t simply a question of the African diaspora. Clemente students born in or with familial ties to China, Korea, and Vietnam are as likely to equate a “red sinking autumn sun” with China, Japan, or the Soviet Union as with the United States or West Africa. Like transatlantic enslavement, the globalizations and globalized conflicts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have done a great deal to create nobodies and to take names away. It was through Bandung that Wright came into a fuller lived consciousness of this fact, and it has been, among other experiences, through my work in Clemente that I have done so. My sense of what counts as public and my sense of what counts as scholarship have been forever changed in consequence.

One of our Clemente students, reduced by his wartime displacement in childhood, retains only the vaguest sense of a birth date, a birthplace, or a given name. He has only one picture of himself from childhood, taken at a refugee camp in Thailand: a photo that became the subject of his Clemente essay “I am Number 4.” When this student encountered Wright’s haiku, he did so as a reader of Asian origin displaced to the United States by a conflict between American and Asian forces, reading poems penned in Europe by a writer of African descent and American origin. This student undertook his
reading in the company of fellow students with African, American, Asian, and European origins. And so, sixty years and more after Bandung, the Worcester branch of the Clemente Course in the Humanities provides a site where the color curtain might be lifted, however fleetingly, bringing together those from diasporic communities of various origins in a commonly held site of exile, and linking them with others born and raised here, working together from a common dwelling place.

Such community building comes in part thanks to considered discussions of works like *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Wright's haiku. These discussions, in turn, occasion modes of collective action and literary criticism informed by the complex challenges and responsibilities of conducting scholarship in public. While such dynamics are flourishing at dozens of Clemente Course branches around the country, in the wake of the economic crises occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, new branches and connections are needed now more than ever before. Although the possibilities for in-person engagement remain uncertain in the immediate term, the shift to remote learning has opened various possibilities for virtual connection, linking publics across substantial geographical divides. Those interested in joining the work of the Clemente Course—whether connecting to existing branches or starting new branches of the Clemente Course in their own rights—can begin the process by contacting Vivé Griffith, the national director of outreach and engagement, and by engaging the staff of their state humanities council in order to gauge commitment and support for such an initiative.

Whether students in our local Clemente Course have been affiliated with Worcester for months, decades, or generations, my impression of many of them echoes Wright's impression of the delegates at Bandung, who, “for the most part, though bitter, looked and hoped toward the West.” For Wright's part, he felt that “the West . . . must be big enough, generous enough, to accept and understand that bitterness” (*Color* 201). At the same time, he understood the risks undertaken by those that pursue projects in the humanities. Speaking in the week after the Bandung Conference in an address to an Indonesian audience titled “The Artist and His Problems,” Wright recalled the murder of his friend Louis Adamic, noted Aristotle's sentiment that “literature is dangerous work,” and encouraged “young writers” to “enter the political arena, go in search of glory and money, but don't be surprised if you end up losing . . . your head!” (qtd. in Roberts and Foulcher 133). Within five years, Wright was found dead in Paris, in cir-
cumstances that some have construed as murder. Twelve years later, Sukarno, the first Indonesian president, was deposed in a violent upheaval killing as many as a million or more, and was subsequently placed under house arrest, where he died three years later.

There are some who would redirect initiatives like the Clemente Course away from all canons, in order to teach a more heterogeneous curriculum that better reflects the makeup of their student cohorts. For his part, Shorris envisioned the Clemente Course as a curriculum poised against “official, acceptable interpretation” (111), valorizing the humanities as a tradition which, “contrary to the views of some critics of what they refer to as ‘the canon’ or the works of ‘dead white European males,’” tends to center on “the works of troublemakers, artistic and intellectual dissidents, those who were both critics and builders” (225). That said, the barriers of Eurocentrism and white supremacy remain, and we do not overlook them. Nor do we overlook troublemakers or dissidents of color: many of these number among our favorite authors, while others number among our finest students. In my seven years of affiliation with the Clemente Course, I have reached the conclusion that canons and counter-canons are most effectively read and understood when taken together. In Worcester, we lift the color curtain not to pretend that it doesn’t exist, or to stand on one side of it, but to look across the larger scene, as an audience that is always already on stage. While diversity and inclusion in the classroom and on the syllabus form critical aspects of our mission, contending with the expressions and representations—the truths, lies, facts, and opinions—found in the diffuse tradition that travels under the heading of “Western civilization” also plays an integral role in the work that we do. We work through the bitterness that such work entails, in order to better look and better hope—not toward some idealized or sanitized version of “the West,” but toward each other.

Works Cited


