



### *Samir Cortez and Richard Wright's Native Son: The Power of Flying Planes*

As I reflected on the reality that one of our students was actually flying an airplane as part of his shadow day experience forced me to think deeply about the significance of Samir Cortez's act of flying. We were so happy for Samir that we shared the photos of him next to the plane and the video of him flying the plane. After viewing the video and the message on the school's post, a very conscious person wrote, "This is what it looks like to begin bridging the divide for marginalized youth with unequal access to resources, opportunities, and mentorship."

When I read these comments, my mind took me back to Richard Wright's *Native Son*, which chronicles the life of a black man, Bigger Thomas, who is crushed and deemed hopeless by the restrictions and confines of a racist American society. Early on in the book, the main character, Bigger, only 20, has a conversation with one of his friends, Gus, when they see an airplane. Upon seeing the plane, Gus says, "Them white boys sure can fly them airplanes." Knowing the confines of race and his limited chances that comes within a racially divided society, Bigger responds, "Yeah...they get a chance to do everything...I could fly a plane if I had a chance." Realizing that Bigger was broken by the fact that "white folks got a chance to do everything" Gus says something profound and sad to Bigger about flying: "God will let you fly when he gives you your wings in Heaven." Here's the sad part, and this is why we were so happy for our student Samir. Samir engaged in something – flying – that was historically forbidden for African Americans. The very act of flying a plane was so unfathomable that, according to Gus, a black person can only fly if given wings by God. So, we are thankful that Samir Cortez did not have to wait until he was given wings by God – he flew his plane this week.

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