



# One Big Self: An Investigation

*C.D. Wright , Deborah Luster*

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"For a long while now, C. D. Wright has been writing some of the greatest poetry-cum-prose you can find in American literature. *One Big Self* does to the contemporary prison-industrial complex what James Agee did to poverty — it reacts passionately and lyrically (and idiosyncratically) to a sociopolitical abomination. This book, while angry and sorrowful and bewildered, has humor, constant levity and candor, and countless moments of incredible beauty." —Dave Eggers, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Wright has found a way to wed fragments of an iconic America to a luminously strange idiom, eerie as a tin whistle, which she uses to evoke the haunted quality of our carnal existence."—*The New Yorker*

Inspired by numerous visits inside Louisiana state prisons—where MacArthur Fellow C.D. Wright served as a “factotum” for a portrait photographer—*One Big Self* bears witness to incarcerated men and women and speaks to the psychic toll of protracted time passed in constricted space. It is a riveting mosaic of distinct voices, epistolary pieces, elements from a moralistic board game, road signage, prison data, inmate correspondence, and “counts” of things—from baby’s teeth to chigger bites:

*Count your folding money*

*Count the times you said you wouldn’t go back*

*Count your debts*

*Count the roaches when the light comes on*

*Count your kids after the housefire*

*One Big Self*—originally published as a large-format limited edition that featured photographs and text—was selected by *The New York Times* and *The Village Voice* as a notable book of the year. This edition features the poem exclusively.

**C.D. Wright** is the author of ten books of poetry, including several collaborations with photographer Deborah Luster. She is a professor at Brown University.

## One Big Self: An Investigation Details

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## Nicola says

Witness. Wright allows the reader to witness these convicts, these Louisiana jails, the experience of entering and being able to leave them, and feel the confusion and strength of such witnessing. She refrains from moralizing, instead giving the fragments. Arranging the fragments in such a way as to let the voices circle into themselves and amplify into "One Big Self." The big pages, the long lengths of her lines, the phrases dangling in space, and the spaces between lines also aid in this sense of hugeness, as well as the sense of a vacuum where time is felt too much--and thus all the counting and inventoring. This must be read in one sitting.

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## Leslie says

what i love most about this book is the collage of actual voices, sign quotes and thoughts from the speaker/interviewer. this choice has heft; it really goes for the gut and i love that. i listened to a (fascinating!) interview with C.D. Wright about her process and it reminded me so much of the social science research we do at my day job. now i am stoked about data collection/poetry research overlap!

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## Sylvia says

One Big Self was an amazing torrent of bits and pieces of people's lives, those of prisoners in three Louisiana prisons. Wright shifts expertly between the voices of the prisoners and the voice of the narrator, creating a tapestry of sometimes haunting personal snapshots, lives before and during incarceration, and her own reflections on her visit and the state of the prison system in the US. This format is a perfect fit for Wright's style - a combination of vernacular and lyrical language.

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## K says

I've always loved C.D. Wright. She writes in a way that is emotional and experimental at the same time. She uses a lot of space in this book of poems and that works well with the subject matter. Repetition, heat, and the constant question about the worth of prisoners returns throughout each section. The reader is almost unsure where one poem ends, another begins, or if it is all one poem. You feel trapped, but get the sense of being able to escape, which is how CD Wright must have felt in the prison talking to the prisoners about their lives. She even mentions this, "If you were me:/ If you wanted blueberries you could have a big bowl." This section is in prose. CD Wright is amazing. Everyone should buy me a copy of this book.

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## Jessie says

A total immersion into the idiom/grit/ache of Louisiana prisons; the photo edition by Deborah Luster is an overwhelming compilation of inmate portraits; I taught the poems in my intro class--50% loved it, 50% hated it--no doubt this book is about encounter.

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### **Mia says**

Benjamin says something about how all masterpieces obliterate a genre, no? My favorite books tend to, at the least, mess with them. This book, like most of Wright's, isn't quite here or there. It's documentary (like Agee!); it's conversational. It's not as splendid as DEEP STEP COME SHINING (ah ah ah!), but it's gorgeously clear-eyed and strange. It's the sort of book that works wonderfully but would be a disaster to imitate. (And so many poets are writing books "on" something today and proceeding by collage...) Loved reading it, though. Now I want to see all of Luster's photographs.

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### **Katie says**

I don't know if you can bear witness for prisons-worth of inmates.

Still, I learned more from this book than from my limited interaction at the Angola Prison Rodeo. And any attempt at witness and empathy-building is needed. There are more than 2 million people in the prison system whom we hardly ever see or think of.

I read, and enjoyed, this collection in an afternoon. The collage form flowed fairly smoothly and built on itself. There are certainly neat voices in it. And at least it didn't read as an extended metaphor for the act of poetry: it let the stories be the story.

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### **Elizabeth says**

This was an interesting book -- the poem that originally accompanied photographs by Deborah Luster of prison inmates in Louisiana. It ranges and returns, a thing I love about her -- she's got this ability to traverse vast distances in her images/metaphor, yet still maintain a thread through repetition and, in that repetition, amplification. I wonder if I'd have been more wowed if the photos were here, too. The poem feels very emotional, but also thin -- it's a reaction, and the subject that's being reacted to isn't perfectly clear.

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### **Esabetta says**

written in a similar style to deepstep come shining. that headless floating voice feeling. quotes from prisoners, sign posts, posters. lousiana heavy as a bell in the heat and driving around the backroads with the windows down. what i found most interesting is thinking about when something clicks together and when it doesn't. i'm not sure i could say exactly why deepstep does. the styles are so similar. the difference between very very good and stunning.

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## **Bridget says**

Do yourself a favor and read this - and when reading it, listen along to the author reciting it here.

Wright paints a picture of life inside the southern prison system. She immerses you in that particular way of life in a very human yet spooky poetic verse. It's been a few months since I've really appreciated a poem, and this was a nice fresh start. Sometimes, the English language is just goddamn mesmerizing.

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## **Jordan says**

Kind of a random selection on my part. Previous to today, I had literally no idea who this C.D Wright person was, but I'm glad I do now <3 kind of an eccentric writer but her poetry was excellent. It was kind of weird reading about a white woman interpreting what jail life is like for others and then making it her art, as that is literally the definition of privilege, but she did it so effortlessly my woke wig was in orbit. Definitely worth a reread in the near future.

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## **Chris says**

I admire the attempt to give voice to prisoners, staff, and victims all at once. But the composite didn't really work for me.

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## **Patrick Bella Gone says**

One Big Self is a brilliant exercise in form: Wright draws on conversation snippets, street signs, and personal rumination, arranging them into cohesive poems that orbit a central event: Wright & photographer Deborah Lester spent significant time at three prisons in Louisiana. Wright is a sponge, a master observer. In lesser hands, this is a standard victim narrative. Academic white woman interviews predominantly black prison culture & exposes atrocities. Yet Wright finds humor here, she doesn't blame only the system, blame is equally distributed. This is no one's fault. She points without pointing fingers, & because of her elliptical quoting, the reader never spends too much time with a single prisoner, never 'identifies.' Wright asks us to remain objective; she gives us the big picture: quotes, numbers, absurdities adding up to a history of the jailed through mosaic.

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## **Jamison says**

Typically, fragmented work washes over me; I enjoy the sensation but leave the book dazed, unable to recall the details of any single poem. Not the case here: the clarity of thought, deliberate repetition of key motifs, and the music of it all make for not just a memorable read but a truly meditative experience. Wright takes the extra step to keep the subject matter, the American penal system (which could easily have been didactic or

melodramatic), insightful, emotional, and presents it without the slightest hint of a personal moral agenda.

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### **Heather says**

A book that takes a snapshot look at the Louisiana prison system and the faces that comprise this system. The book portrays the complexity of situations that exist. What to think of a person, and a society, that imprisons more people of one person's immediate family than live outside the prison complex?

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