

One Book One Northwestern essay

*The Night Watchman*

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In my childhood, I was raised on stories about the importance of community and its key role in social movements. Moving to the United States from Ethiopia after my adoption, I learned about my new country's history, including the systemic injustices faced by marginalized communities and the transformative impact of movements such as the Civil Rights Movement. My grandparents' involvement in labor unions and their advocacy for workers' rights provided personal examples of collective action's effectiveness. My grandparents have played incredibly active roles in my life. Before her retirement, I spent many days with my grandmother at her job in the Minnesota Nurses Association, having the special privilege to see in-person the important work those within the union did to ensure their employees were provided a safe, prosperous career. My grandfather—a former Air Force member deployed in Vietnam—shared tales of his struggles for labor rights at Northwest Airlines, with one strike lasting a full year. Growing up with these stories I have come to truly appreciate the vitality of a strong labor movement and how organized resistance can bring about necessary change.

These lessons gained deeper significance as I navigated my own experiences as a black teenager, especially amid the 2020 movement following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis law enforcement. This period of intense activism and social unrest, coupled with the 2016 police killing of Philando Castile—an employee of my elementary school, J.J. Hill—emphasized the ongoing necessity of community engagement in the fight for racial justice. The mass organized collaboration of the Black Lives Matter movement resonates with themes in Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman*.

*The Night Watchman* tells the story of the Turtle Mountain band of Chippewa in North Dakota fighting to preserve their rights and resist a federal termination policy aimed at dismantling their tribes. While the novel does showcase the work of the character Thomas Wazhashk specifically, the story displays the power of community as they all come together to battle against legislative oppression and advocate for their survival and sovereignty. The themes of community, resilience, and solidarity in *The Night Watchman* mirror the experiences of social justice advocacy I have encountered in my personal life and broader societal movements.

In *The Night Watchman*, the characters' struggle against a United States government seeking to undermine their rights parallels the experiences of modern movements. Just as the characters in Erdrich's novel unite to challenge a discriminatory policy (one that

completely abandons treaties America made with those indigenous groups), initiatives like BLM mobilize to address racial injustices and systemic inequalities. The novel demonstrates how the strength of a community can resist and confront oppressive forces, a theme that resonates deeply with the activism witnessed during the 2020 protests.

The story of *The Night Watchman* describes gathering petitions and moving through the legal and political space to oppose unjust law, while BLM began as sporadic public demonstrations, growing into larger calls for justice in corporate, legal, and political spheres. Protests against police brutality underscored the urgent need for systemic change and highlighted the power of communities coming together to demand justice. Similarly, the collective efforts of the characters in Erdrich's novel reflect the importance of unity in challenging and dismantling entrenched systems of oppression.

My personal connection to these themes was reinforced after Philando Castile's death and the 2020 uprisings four years later. Castile's murder, which occurred during a routine traffic stop, was a stark reminder of the pervasive issue of state-sanctioned racial violence. His role in my elementary school community made the broader struggle for racial justice more immediate and personal. The activism and protests I witnessed as a resident of Saint Paul immediately after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis put into the foreground the power of collaborative activity in addressing these issues, mirroring the cooperative resolve depicted in *The Night Watchman*.

The strength of community and organized resistance is heavily emphasized in Erdrich's novel, reflecting the value of collective pursuit towards equality in our world now. In *The Night Watchman*, Thomas Wazhashk and his community members contribute their individual strengths to a larger endeavor, highlighting how personal experiences are integral to achieving shared goals. This dynamic is also evident in the BLM movement, where individual activists, lawyers, and journalists contribute their personal skills to a broader effort to challenge systemic racism and advocate for change—one that found itself going beyond a national stage, inspiring massive protests across the world.

These experiences also shed light on broader questions of justice and equity. In *The Night Watchman*, the struggle involves not only addressing immediate injustices but also confronting and transforming systemic inequalities. Similarly, contemporary movements seek to address immediate grievances—over-policing of black and brown neighborhoods, criminalization of addiction, among others—while also recognizing that these issues exist within a larger oppressive system built to create a cycle of poverty and criminalization through systemic racist means. The community efforts of these movements, and the progress they have made, demonstrate the importance of addressing disparities and advocating for comprehensive reforms to achieve a more equitable society.

Progress requires group action in challenging unjust systems and striving for fair treatment and opportunities for all individuals. Though the work is far from over, the successes of movements like BLM and the struggles depicted in *The Night Watchman* highlight the necessity of community in pursuing meaningful and lasting change. These narratives emphasize that while individual contributions are vital, it is through organized work that we can address systemic issues and move towards a more just and equitable world.