

# Unreading Modernism: Richard Wright's Literary Journalism

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Richard Wright's journalism has been largely unexamined by Wright scholars. He has never been studied—in my view, mistakenly—as a literary journalist nor placed in an African American tradition of journalism or literary journalism.<sup>1</sup> And yet his journalism is infused with qualities that put him firmly in line with other African Americans who are remembered today primarily as writers of fiction or poetry or plays but who nevertheless wrote literary journalism.<sup>2</sup> Some of these include Langston Hughes, Alice Childress, Zora Neale Hurston, Melvin Tolson, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Nella Larsen, and Jessie Fauset. Like most of these writers, Wright produced a kind of African American literary journalism that has as its primary objective a change of social policy or order, while it also clearly demonstrates new expressive and stylistic forms. In what follows, I will concentrate on works that I think best reveal Wright as a heretofore unrecognized literary journalist: *12 Million Black Voices* (1940) and a selection of his exile writings: *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*, (1954), *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (1956), and *Pagan Spain* (1957). My objective will be to demonstrate the usefulness of literary journalistic forms to Wright as an African American writer and global humanitarian. Along the way, I want to show how Wright, while advancing his aesthetic aims, repurposed traditional journalism through what I'm calling his "transnational modernism" in order to promote a political solidarity with oppressed people around the world.<sup>3</sup>

Wright's transnational modernism is inseparable from his social objectives. He envisioned a future in which race would be central to the aspirations of his modernism and cosmopolitanism might come to be reconceived as something solid, meaning more than simply being detached from one's country. His vision anticipated the current revisionist scholarship on modernisms by such critics as Stephen Eric Bronner (*Modernism at the Barricades*, 2012), Joseph B. Entin (*Sensational Modernism*, 2007), Sara Blair (*Harlem Crossroads*, 2007), Michael Thurston (*Making Something Happen: American Political Poetry between the Wars*, 2001), Edward M. Pavlic, (*Crossroads Modernism: Descent and Emergence in African-American Literary Culture*, 2002), and George Hutchinson (*The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, 1995). Wright's position is echoed in Michelle Stephens's view on what is embedded in "African-American Modernisms": "[an] awareness of the text and the artwork as inextricably intertwined within, and in dialogue with, a modern racialized social reality."<sup>4</sup> African American modernists built from social realism a "black modernity which could be perceived and performed in multiple modes, genres, and registers."<sup>5</sup>

Yet this position can only be understood in relation to how Wright anticipated "a modernism that knows we have never been modern."<sup>6</sup> For Wright,

we have never been modern most crucially in a social and racial sense that would equate being modern with having mastered a new humanitarianism. Wright realized that the only acceptable modernism to which to aspire was one fully cognizant of social equity and justice. Indeed, Wright's modernism uncovers the "crime[s] of modernity": the inexorable pursuit of pecuniary power as well as the failure to find and identify any kind of sustainable social equality. Wright's modernism reveals a world image—a modernity overflowing with racism and violence, a kind of repository of "that which fundamentally determines subjectivity."<sup>8</sup> This modernism would follow the implications of W. E. B. Du Bois's call to heed the struggles of all repressed peoples: "[B]efore the Negroes of the Western World can play any effective part they must first acquaint themselves with what is taking place in that larger world whose millions are in motion. . . . If our problem here is really part of a great world-wide problem, we must make our attempts to solve our part link up with the attempts being made elsewhere to solve other parts."<sup>9</sup> Especially in his exile writings, Wright made Du Bois's advice visible.

Adding to this, Wright's cultural definitions of a modern identity highlight the importance of poverty—an additional uncovering—not only as a "critical category,"<sup>10</sup> but also as a literary frame and literary-journalistic frame for organizing and analyzing race and culture. Wright's fictional and autobiographical engagements with poverty, running from Mississippi to Chicago, from (present-day) Ghana to Jakarta, especially when combined with race, unsettle literary-historical and literary-journalistic categories. Wright encompasses a modernism in which the majority of his characters exist outside the structures of ownership and where families cannot be depended on as a source of stability. He embraced a modernism that positions itself against the very forces it reveals.

Wright's transnational modernism—especially in its literary journalistic forms—needs to be given critical attention. Although Wright's major achievement as a writer was in fiction, his entire career was enlivened by his journalism and various forms of literary journalism. One of the first journals to publish Wright's work was Jack Conroy's *The Anvil* (1933–35), a journal of proletarian fiction and essays. Although Wright published only two poems ("Strength" and "Child of Dead and Forgotten Gods," March/April 1934 issue) and one short story ("Post Office Nights," July/August 1934 issue), the *Anvil's* proletarian focus encouraged Wright's leftist view and radical polemical forms. The research he did (much of it sociologically oriented) and the journalistic forms that he learned as a writer and editor of the *Daily Worker*,<sup>11</sup> the official newspaper of the Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s, underlie his most effective literary journalism and were instrumental in develop-

ing the successful autobiographical prose for which he is most remembered. His work for the *Daily Worker* deepened his understanding of race relations and urban racial problems and helped prepare him for the writing of his later essayistic and politically infused fiction (*Black Boy*, 1945; *Native Son*, 1940) and literary journalism discussed below.

Beneath the array of topics that he covered for the *Daily Worker*, which ranged from lynchings, rent strikes, and the Joe Louis–Max Schemling fight to the Scottsboro case, peace parades, and black theater, he sought to do more than merely chronicle events or apprise his readers of the most recent racial injustices. He wished to change American culture by redefining social class, reconfiguring race and nationhood, and resetting the terms of public conversation in writings that would convince as much by their style and form as by their content. His pieces for the *Partisan Review* (“Between the World and Me,” 1934), the *New Challenge* (“Blueprint for Negro Writing,” 1937), the *Atlantic Monthly* (“I Bite the Hand That Feeds Me,” 1940; “I Tried to be a Communist,” 1944), the *New Masses* (“Not My People’s War,” 1941), *Harp-er’s Magazine* (“What You Know Won’t Hurt You,” 1942), *Présence Africaine* (“Bright and Morning Star,” 1946), and *Ebony* (“The Shame of Chicago,” 1951) provided homes for his combinations of literary, nonfiction, and autobiographical writing, all of which would reappear in various blended forms in his longer works. As such, Wright’s fiction and journalism, engaging in a dynamic dialogue within and among communities (e.g., Memphis, Chicago, New York, Paris, Jakarta, Spain), debated the major racial, philosophical, and social issues of the early- and mid-twentieth century while questioning conventionally accepted definitions of modernism and modernity.

### **12 MILLION BLACK VOICES (1941)**

Wright’s first long work adopting literary-journalistic techniques is the photo essay *12 Million Black Voices*.<sup>12</sup> Accompanied by the photographs that Edward Rosskam had selected from the files of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) during the Depression, *Black Voices* presents itself as a “true-life” story based on the techniques of Horace J. Cayton and the “Chicago School” of sociology that chronicled social patterns of urbanization, juvenile delinquency, and ethnic groups during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>13</sup> In this work, Wright is a “sociological informant”<sup>14</sup> and, as demonstrated in *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, a believer in viewing the individual as representative of a group. Congruently, it was *Black Voices* that, with “its investments in the Chicago School of Urban Sociology and the deterministic slant of its theories,”<sup>15</sup> would prove to be a starting point for Wright’s later forays into what most critics have called his travel writings of the 1950s: *Black Power* (1954), *The*

*Color Curtain* (1956), *White Man Listen!* (1957), and *Pagan Spain* (1957).<sup>16</sup> *Black Voices* signals Wright's experiment to develop a stylistics that would mark his purchase on the social data he wanted to transform into fiction, the result of which is, in broad terms, literary journalism. It also shows his alliance with a kind of lyric poetry that would take his literary career full circle and dominate, in the form of haiku, the last years of his writing life.

Wright's association with the most advanced sociological thought of his time not only provided greater insight into social reality, but also led him to innovative narrative devices and experiments that were more conducive to his experiences and thoughts than the forms of either straightforward fictional or nonfictional narratives. By the late 1930s, Wright was one of the decade's writers Michael Thurston has characterized as "writ[ing] not only out of a sense of political mission but also out of an aesthetic sense independent of political orthodoxies."<sup>17</sup> Attacks on the cultural politics of the American Communist Party coming from such directions as the *Partisan Review* of William Phillips and Phillip Rahv during the mid- and late 1930s championed a "[l]iterature that seeks to express 'truth' rather than the political program of a specific party." This is so because such a literature "is inherently more revolutionary than the supposedly revolutionary writing of those who toe the party line more closely."<sup>18</sup> Conducive to his politics of the late 1930s, Wright's literary journalism makes us aware of the ways that this form creates particular storytelling parameters while emphasizing its importance as a culturally recognized category.<sup>19</sup>

Documentary fiction is the standard term used for classifying *Black Voices*, but I prefer the term literary journalism—despite its hazards—to documentary fiction or documentary expression. Indeed the practice of literary journalism in *Black Voices* can best explain Wright's narrative strategy, epistemological position, and shifting from factual to fictional discourses, or combining such discourses. According to William Stott, "Documentary is the presentation or representation of actual fact that makes it credible and vivid to people at the time. Since all emphasis is on the fact, its validity must be [as] unquestionable as possible."<sup>20</sup> As a literary-journalistic text, however, *Black Voices* makes no such claim to pure nonfictiveness and "fact," for it openly flaunts its fictionality and figuralizations, and openly presents itself as a textuality of modernity—literary, poetic, visual—while exposing the oppression experienced by African Americans and the "paternalistic code"<sup>21</sup> employed by whites toward them. The effect of this literary-journalistic text not only puts the reader in the position of struggling African American migrants and various urban populations, but forces a distinctly modernist self-consciousness upon them.

*Black Voices* marks the beginning of Wright's trajectory to develop a transnational modernism based on a dynamic combination of modernist and literary journalistic techniques. As it registers itself through a narrative of phenomenological consciousness, this modernity calls for a freeing from logical causality and relationship as it parts from Wright's well-known naturalistic trajectory. Wright created and cultivated a very different kind of modernism. As Wright explained in a 1941 interview on *Black Voices*, "The main thing [is] to show the movement from folk life to urbanization. . . . I want to show the inner complexities and scars that take place when a people are torn away from one culture and are forced to adjust themselves to another."<sup>22</sup> Wright was concerned less with historically verifiable fact than with the emotional patterns and spiritual developments of African Americans migrating from rural areas to cities; he was especially interested, as a participant himself, in the Great Migration.

WRIGHT'S LITERARY JOURNALISTIC INFLECTIONS OF THE  
"WE" AND "YOU" IN *BLACK VOICES*

By countering traditional documentary accounts of the American 1930s in which "the heart of documentary is not form or style or medium, but always content"<sup>23</sup>, *Black Voices* is, in Wright's words, an alternative to "[c]urrent American thought" that "is so fastened upon trying to make what is *presently* real the only and right reality, that it has quite forgotten the reality of the passion and hunger of millions of exploited workers and dissatisfied minorities."<sup>24</sup> Simultaneously expanding and contravening the attitudes and positions of the Farm Security Administration (FSA)-rooted documentary enabled Wright to produce a self-consciously modernist experiment that reflects his aesthetic and social commitments.<sup>25</sup> *Black Voices*, therefore, is at once a literary journalistic text that cross-examines documentary conventions and, in its modernist guises, compels attention to the world beyond representation.<sup>26</sup>

Wright takes us most effectively into this world through his impassioned use of the "we" in *Black Voices*.<sup>27</sup> Coming largely out of his literary and journalistic training, this creation of we, even though infusing "ordinary people with divine speech"<sup>28</sup> and serving as the text's "literary voice," largely relies on sociological data to build a collective story. But Wright takes such data and transposes it, as Jeff Allred notes, into "the classical epic's encompassing range of space and time and its ambition to speak to a wide audience about an unprecedented emergence."<sup>29</sup> And yet, this epic form is countered by Wright's topical materialistic infusions: photographs from the files of the FSA, veiled accounts of his own experience as a participant in the Great Migration, statistics from public records, and his personal intellectual accounts

of black history. These infusions make the epic qualities of *Black Voices* not only progressive and ongoing, as opposed to closed and final, but elicit reader involvement with the characters in the work—the black maid, the black industrial worker, the black stevedore, the black dancer, the black waiter, the black sharecropper—and the historical forces they face. The epic dimensions of Wright’s “we” aim to encourage readers to criticize, rather than passively accept, the social and racial conditions *Black Voices* enumerates. At the same time, this use of “we” reflects many of the strategies found in the high modernist arsenal:<sup>30</sup> “fragmentation, the primacy of form, the integration of non-poetic material, and the sense of a culture in crisis”<sup>31</sup>, but with a crucial difference—Wright foregrounds the social realities of class and race in his history of African Americans.

Furthermore, Wright’s “we” engages in a conversational dialogue with the reader whom, from the opening pages of *Black Voices*, Wright assumes does not know “us” for “we are not what we seem.”<sup>32</sup> The narrator appears to imagine the reader—much as Rebecca Harding Davis imagines her readers in *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861)—as bourgeois and misinformed about the rural “folk” and immigrant laborers. Because the narrator does not allow for verbally and semantically autonomous characters and does not permit a character’s speech to possess its own belief system, there is, in Bakhtin’s sense, no “second language.”<sup>33</sup> The narrator’s voice becomes the “situation monitor”<sup>34</sup> for each particular exchange or observation and the controlling authority of African American subjectivity. The narrating “we” gives itself the principal task of revealing the “uneasily tied knot of pain and hope whose snarled strands converge from many points of time and space.”<sup>35</sup>

Wright employs the “we” narration in a nonrealistic antimimetic way through transgressing fundamental cognitive and rhetorical categories. The literariness of *Black Voices* is based on the narrator becoming, in a standard literary-journalistic mode of the American and French 1930s and 1940s (that employed, for example, by Joseph Kessel, Blaise Cendrars, Dorothy Day, Meridel le Sueur, Jessie Fauset, James Agee), a persona in his/her own story. Never withholding its power of omniscience and locating itself at the center of its racial history, the collective “we” persona in *Black Voices* shows how race is a determinant for social mobility, citizenship, protection under the law, employment, privilege, and marginalization. But, to be sure, it does so in relation to Wright’s modernism devoted to a cultural politics of race and its global implications.

Wright’s most effective narrative devices are not purely expository, modernist (in a high modernist sense), or sociological per se, but those used in combination with his literary or literary-journalistic techniques. To gain such

an effect in *Black Voices*, Wright employs a kind of emotionally evocative direct address to implore the reader to enter into a specific situation of distress:

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. . . . We had our own civilization in Africa before we were captured and carried off to this land. *You* may smile when we call the way of life we live in Africa “civilization,” but in numerous respects the culture of many of our tribes was equal to that of the lands from which they come.<sup>36</sup> (my emphasis)

Wright’s use of direct address is self-analytical, closely associated with a discovery of the “we” and a placing of the reader on the same plane of reality—or irreality—he occupies. Wright hopes to make the bridge between the “we” and “you” a most conscious relationship, wishing to inspire actual readers with the “you” in the text.<sup>37</sup> The dismay and doubts the narrator expresses are an acknowledgment that his vision is subjective but grounded in actual historical fact. By placing his reader in a variety of identifications and positions of reception (through his use of “we” and “you”), the narrator bends his story to strategies of social and racial interdependence. Wright’s literary-journalistic use of the first-person plural and direct address in *Black Voices* complicates the dichotomy that Carla Cappetti argues for in her discussion of the relationship between literature and sociology: “[The sociological theory] articulate[s] and evolve[s] the [literary text] into a set of concepts and categories, the [literary text] dramatizes [the sociological theory] and demonstrat[es] its functioning in the concrete details of a life-story.”<sup>38</sup> Wright has it both ways. Indeed, it can even be said that *Black Voices*, as a literary-journalistic and modernist text, serves *several* functions at the same time: it is self-reflective and objective, literary and reportorial, detached and engaged.

#### WRIGHT’S LITERARY-JOURNALISTIC USE OF ANALOGY

Exposing a dominant critical line on the form of the documentary book—that is, “brand[ing] texts with a collectivist orientation as propagandistic and as insufficiently complex and modernist”<sup>39</sup>—Wright metamorphosizes the dominant white plantation and land owners in the American South into the “Lords of the Land” and the white industrial elite of the North into the “Bosses of Buildings.” For Wright, these two analogic forces are the “operatives” of “the New World”:

The opinion of the nation divided into two opposing constellations: a world of mechanics and a world of slaves. Two groups of leaders sprang up: the Bosses of the Buildings and the Lords of the Land.<sup>40</sup>

Mimicking such sociological definitions as Drake and Cayton’s “Native

White,” “Foreign Born-White and Other Races,” “older Immigrant groups,”<sup>41</sup> Wright creates his own definitions and categories, using the sociological to suggest its significance in organizing conceptions of literary identity. Wright places on the grid of abstract and objective 1930s sociological postulations and theories *individuated* examples of the black maid,<sup>42</sup> the black industrial worker, the black stevedore, the black dancer,<sup>43</sup> and the black sharecropper as narrative markers for the photographs that represent these professions. As an insider who feels personally identified with the material in his narrative, he speaks for and to his subjects, but with enough objective distance to discern, for example, in reference to the plantation system, “patterns of psychological reaction, welding us together into a separate unity with common characteristics of our own.”<sup>44</sup> In deploying such analogical devices, the narrator is the chronicler who individuates but doesn’t dwell on any one close-up (in photographic or narrative descriptive form) for too long because he doesn’t want to take the reader away from the implications of individual lives in broader social contexts.

Similar to his intermedial mixings involving the “we” narrative and his use of direct address, Wright links archival artefacts and the raw data of sociological fieldwork to conventions of fictional narrative. Here Wright baldly combines his symbolic literary and analogic appellations (“Bosses of the Buildings,” “Lords of the Land”), placing them in a quasi-epic context, with historical statistics, which harkens back to Drake and St. Clair’s use of charts, facts, and numbers in *Black Metropolis*:

The Bosses of the Buildings feed upon the Lords of the Land, and the Lords of the Land feed upon the 5,000,000 landless poor whites and upon us, throwing to the poor whites the scant solace of filching from us 4,000,000 landless blacks what the poor whites themselves are cheated of in this elaborate game.<sup>45</sup>

Wright’s analogic deployments carefully locate the Bosses of the Buildings and the Lords of the Land in historical and racial contexts. At the same time, these deployments contribute to dislocating the analogies from the specific historical contexts of the first half of the twentieth century. This division contributes to the impressionistic and modernistic structure of the text. And this kind of shape shifting—glossing historical fact or interpretation with literary vision—allows Wright to construct his own role as a black writer as he exposes the complicity of racial segregation and capitalism. Wright’s forms of literary journalism and modernism open up a space for him to address more explicitly than he did in his other work the formation of collective racial consciousness.

Such an exposure is best revealed by *Black Voices*’s relationship to main-

stream Anglo-American modernism. Wright's modernism contested existing modernistic forms that could not supply the formal meanings required to renovate conventional middle-class values and prejudices. Thus *Black Voices* focuses not on the "so-called talented tenth" but on "that vast and tragic school [of blacks] that swims below in the depths, against the current, silently and heavily, struggling against the waves of vicissitudes that spell a common fate."<sup>46</sup> As staked out in *Black Voices*, Wright's social and racial representations within American modernism parallel Anne Petry's view that a necessary function of the novel is "social criticism,"<sup>47</sup> ideally resulting in interpretations that might explain the United States to itself at a particular historical moment. As such, *Black Voices*, through its emphasis on the relationship of poverty to race and class, is based on a collective narrative voice that defies the era's characteristic (Rooseveltian) call to collective identity.<sup>48</sup> The strongest weapon he uses to convey this modernism arguably comes from his literary journalism.

#### **BLACK POWER (1954)**

Travel writing is the conventional label given to Wright's *Black Power*, *The Color Curtain*, and *Pagan Spain*, but this attribution is more problematic than it may seem.<sup>49</sup> A typical definition of travel writing can be found in Judith Hamera and Alfred Bendixen's introduction to the recent *Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* (2009):

[T]ravel writing [is] a non-fiction genre based, at least in theory, on the real experiences of actual travelers rooted in the specific details of both history and geography. . . . American travel writing also exposes cultural and genre fault lines. It exists betwixt and between the factual report and the fictional account, personal memoir and ethnography, science and romance.<sup>50</sup>

The authors go on to argue that the "boundary between travel writing and fiction can be especially murky and that travel writing is much like autobiography" in that "fact and fiction . . . intermingle in individual works as well."<sup>51</sup> Although incorporating some traits of Hamera and Bendixen's definition, Wright's exile writings come into sharper focus if seen through the critical constructs and theories of literary journalism in at least four ways: 1. Wright's literary journalism can offer more comprehensive and convincing narrative explanations with regard to the relations between "fact" and "fiction" than those presently seen in (American) travel writing criticism (e.g., *Black Power* is *not* a strictly "non-fiction genre"); 2. Wright's exile writings deliberately ask hard questions in reference to race, class, and gender, as well as to national belonging, and to an international struggle for human rights that in their polemical intentions and priorities go beyond most definitions of travel literature; 3. Decidedly sociologically discursive (reminiscent of *Black*

*Voices*), Wright's exile writings enter the ongoing reinvention of the United States in the twentieth century in the context of Wright's struggles with colonial legacies and new geopolitical arrangements that stray from the prerogatives of most travel literature (and Wright does not in any of these works define himself as a "traveler"); 4. Wright represents an important literary-journalistic beginning of integrating a fact-laden narrative into a modern narrative art form, a form that shifts the narrative away from any kind of realistic travel account.

It is no surprise, then, that "[Wright's] publishers, agents, and critics in the 1950s and through the 1980s did not consider [these exile writings] travel books."<sup>52</sup> They simply didn't know what to call them or how to classify them because Wright had produced works—objective and subjective—that were years ahead of their time. In effect, Wright's "travel books" might be productively inserted into the discourse of an African American literary journalistic tradition so that these works can receive their due merit as a crucial genre of expression used by Wright and other African American writers.

Congruently, it must be recognized that *Black Power*, *The Color Curtain*, and *Pagan Spain* mark crucial steps in Wright's formulation of a transnational modernism. Wright ultimately pursued transnational spaces that allowed him to reconfigure narrative as unbound to national literary forms and social relations. These works, all coming from the 1950s and concerning themselves with diasporic and global revolutionary movements, can be placed according to their sense of African American expressive culture and subjectivity, which, in Wright's case, expands the form as well as the content of Anglo-American modernism. Formalistically, these three works respond to a modernist style in that they resort to narrative discontinuities and deferrals and move toward a pluralism or fusion of narrative forms.

*Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* was Wright's first extended examination of an African country, Ghana, called the Gold Coast in 1953. Through the intervention of George Padmore, the Trinidadian author of *Pan-Africanism or Communism?* (1956), Wright was invited by the Gold Coast Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah "to do some research into the social and historical aspects of the country."<sup>53</sup> "This volume," Wright explains, "is a first-person, subjective narrative on the life and conditions of the Colony and Ashanti areas of the Gold Coast, an area comprising perhaps the most highly socially evolved native life of present-day Africa."<sup>54</sup> Consequently, Wright toured Ghana, Sierra Leone, and other African countries—creating in 1954, out of this experience, *Black Power*. Spending nearly the entire period from June to September 1953 in the British colony, Wright attended a session of the legislative council in which Nkrumah proposed constitutional changes

that would lead to the Gold Coast's eventual independence and self-government. For Wright, though, these measures, however adequate for an eventual independence from Britain, weren't enough.

Directly addressing Nkrumah—in the form of a ten-page open letter—he ends *Black Power* with a strident plea that the Gold Coast should “militarize” itself:

I'm speaking simply of a militarization of the daily, social lives of the people; I'm speaking of giving form, organization, direction, meaning, and a sense of justification to those lives. . . . I'm speaking of a temporary discipline that will unite the nation, sweep out the tribal cobwebs, and place the feet of the masses upon a basis of reality.<sup>55</sup>

Wright's militarization would be based on “[a] military form of African society” created through a compulsory draft that “will atomize the fetish-ridden past [and] abolish the mystical and nonsensical family relations that freeze the African in his static degradation.”<sup>56</sup> The inhabitants of the Gold Coast, Wright argues, must enter the modern industrialized world but cannot do so by ignoring world capitalism and Soviet communism:

Above all, Africans must be regimentalized for the “long pull,” for what will happen in Africa will spread itself out over decades of time and a continent of space. . . . You know as well as I that what has happened in the Gold Coast is just the beginning; and there will be much marching to and fro; there will be many Sunderings and amalgamations of people; there will be many shiftings and changes of aims, perspectives, and ideologies—there will be much confusion before the final redemption of Africa is accomplished.<sup>57</sup>

Here we have part of a hard-edged polemic, dominating the last several pages of *Black Power* and accompanied by the same kind of sociological discourse that Wright relied on in *Black Voices*. Countering what Eric Schocket has called “the assimilative dictates of literary discourse,”<sup>58</sup> this kind of journalistic editorializing evokes Wright's impulses to write about the broad processes informing the relationship of race to exploitation and suffering under global capitalism. In this way, he makes his didactic points known in a rather traditional way.

Despite, however, the book's very real-life concern with the Gold Coast freeing itself from its British colonizers, *Black Power* is not a straightforward journalistic narrative. Because Wright felt alienated and estranged from the Africa he was discovering, he responded to it through constant descriptions of (highly subjective) anxiety and fear. For example, upon seeing the mud huts outside of Takoradi, Wright comments: “I was gazing upon a world whose laws I did not know, upon faces whose reactions were riddles to me. There was nothing here that I could predict, anticipate, or rely upon and, in spite

of myself, a mild sense of anxiety began to fill me . . . I was prey to a vague sense of mild panic, an oppressed burden of alertness which I could not shake off.”<sup>59</sup> As Sara Blair notes, “The collective ‘we’ used in *Twelve Million Black Voices* is decisively dropped as Wright explores Africa’s alterity and his own lack of feeling of racial connection,”<sup>60</sup> which is compounded by his uncertainty about his own identity and place. Replacing the “we” are Wright’s inability to connect with Africans, his predisposition to remain “rational” and “areligious,” and his clinging to “Western sensibilities.”<sup>61</sup> By his own appraisal, he was *not* a spiritual descendant of Africa.

And yet, *Black Power* is a factual, progressive narrative, regularly infiltrated by the narrative techniques that Wright had mastered in his fiction. Like his fiction, *Black Power* makes use of a clarifying narrator, a persona of Wright, obliged to explain or justify himself/herself to others, be those others readers, or other characters, or some imagined or real community. “[I]f I become polemic,” Wright stated in a 1960 interview, “it is because I am trying to tell the reader something and I am afraid he does not understand.”<sup>62</sup> In *Black Power* and *Black Voices*, there seems to be the assumption that this other will not be able to understand without such explanations—or, in one of Wright’s favorite terms, without “revelation”:

I have always taken the writing of literature very seriously and I’ve looked upon fiction and writing in general as a means of revealing the truth of life and experience rather than purely as a means of entertaining people. . . . [L]iterature ought to be a sharp instrument to reveal something important about mankind, about living, about life whether among whites or blacks.<sup>63</sup>

By creating a social consciousness that would elucidate a collective sense of black life in Africa, America, and elsewhere, Wright’s autobiographical literary-journalistic prose—bolstered by his transnational modernistic forms—is the dominant narrative mode of *Black Power* and his other exile writing. Through this mode, Wright attempted to depart from all previous forms of African American writing. He not only portrayed “his liberal-radicalness, his blackness, his maleness, his Americanness,”<sup>64</sup> but offered a new global perspective and humanitarian vision, which included a look backward at the injustices, hunger, and despair of his earlier life.

*Black Power* is more a novel than a travel narrative and more a literary-journalistic account—inflected by Wright’s experimental approach to non-fiction—than a novel.<sup>65</sup> An early critic was baffled by its form, calling it “a curious mixture of history, biographical sketches, exposition of social customs and political chicanery.”<sup>66</sup> Wright’s black archetypes (e.g., 79), profuse dialogue (e.g., 67), his use of a first-person persona who explores unknown territory and is bewildered by it, and his extensive turns to symbolism (e.g.,

399) and imagery (e.g., 75)—all these techniques cast *Black Power* as more “literary” than nonfictional. But perhaps even more importantly, Wright’s account in *Black Power* can be most clearly seen as his struggle to find an effective critical language for his impressions, fears, and disappointments in his encounters with the Gold Coast. Despite his problematic stance toward African culture, his anger and distrust over African customs and mores, and his schematizing of such concepts as “non-Western” or “pre-industrial,” his 1953 visit to the Gold Coast marks the point at which he attempts to locate the nature of black modernity through a transnational lens. *Black Power* is “a subjective narrative” in which Wright offers his own experiences as a template for contemporary history and his “political and psychological rebellion”<sup>67</sup> as a conception of reality that attempts to resist the chaos and repression of his American experience. Deploying literary-journalistic forms, Wright’s modernism results from the radical nature of his political and social necessities, fuelled by his untiring energy for experimentation.

#### *THE COLOR CURTAIN (1956)*

Wright envisioned *The Color Curtain* as a companion piece to *Black Power*.<sup>68</sup> Both works are dominated by Wright’s hybridic prose as well as his quest for understanding the relationship between racism in the United States and the global realities of colonialism and capitalism in Africa and Asia.<sup>69</sup> In the spring of 1955, Wright attended the Bandung Asian–African conference held in Bandung, Indonesia. Gathering participants from twenty-nine independent and “non-aligned” nations—including China, Indonesia, Burma, Turkey, Egypt, the Philippines, and Ethiopia—the conference debated problems of special interest to Asian and African peoples (e.g., “national sovereignty . . . racialism and colonialism,” advancing “the promotion of world peace and cooperation,”<sup>70</sup> and setting an agenda of social and economic solidarity for these countries’ impoverished populations).

The Bandung conference provided Wright with another lens through which to view the dehumanization of modernity and with subject material for “using the forms that seemed to [him] the most suitable for what [he] had to say, for what [he] felt had to be said.”<sup>71</sup> Near the beginning of the work, Wright criticizes the Western media’s account of the conference:

These men . . . representing some of the world’s biggest and most powerful news gathering agencies, knew less, perhaps, than even I about what was going on . . . I soon realized that American newsmen had at least two grave disabilities in trying to grasp what was happening: one, they had no philosophy of history with which to understand Bandung; two, they were trying to understand actions initiated by someone else and they could not quite grasp the nature of the terms in which those actions were being projected.<sup>72</sup>

He then goes on to present excerpted samples from the mainstream newspaper, magazine, and radio-television reports that covered the event—the *Delhi Times* of India, the *Globe and Mail* of Toronto, *Newsweek*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Paris Herald Tribune*, the *New York Times*, and the Manchester *Guardian*—and expresses opinions on several of the passages. For example, he glosses an excerpt from a speech given by the American secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, regarding Dulles's description of the conference:

The words that cut short and hurt the Asian-African delegates most came from no less than the American Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. In a radio-television address in Washington on the 8th of March, 1955, he referred to the conference as follows: "Three of the Asian parties to the Pacific Charter, Pakistan, the Philippines and Thailand, may shortly be meeting with other Asian countries at a so-called Afro-Asian conference." (The single phrase, "so-called Afro-Asian conference," echoed and re-echoed at Bandung as proof of American contempt; and the people who called attention to it were not Communists.)<sup>73</sup>

The commentary of these journals—variously condescending, supportive, critical, guardedly optimistic, and patronizing—not only set "the atmosphere, brooding, bitter, apprehensive, which greeted the conference,"<sup>74</sup> but also created a narrative paradigm to which the narrative experiments of *Color Curtain* respond. To Wright these press accounts seem inconclusive and partial because they ignore the deeper issues of psychology, emotion, and spirituality needed "to penetrate the color curtain"—which is a Western-created kind of "buffer between [the Occidental countries] and the illiterate yellow and brown and black masses."<sup>75</sup> Wright wished to offer a psychological and sociological critique on the relationship between race and geopolitical space and thus felt compelled to create narrative forms equal to this task: namely, those conjoining his literary journalism and his transnational modernism.

*The Color Curtain* is Wright's alternative to conventional journalistic reporting. Although he dutifully treats the major speakers of the conference (e.g., Wright interviewed Mohammed Nastir and Sultan Sjahrir; he transcribed the speeches of Nehru, Nasser, and Sir John Kotelawala) and describes its principal themes (e.g., "the struggle against colonialism"), his real interest could be described as "literary." That is to say, he's more concerned with the creation of character, psychological portrayals (including his own), and dramatic constructions of "race consciousness"<sup>76</sup>—as opposed, for example, to proposing geopolitical solutions or suggestions for North-South negotiations. To his wife, before he departs for Jakarta, Wright revealingly justifies his participation in Bandung:

[M]y life has given me some keys to what they would say or do. I'm an American Negro; as such, I've had a burden of race consciousness. So have these people. I worked in my youth as a common laborer, and I've a class consciousness. So have these people. I grew up in a Methodist and Seventh Day Adventist churches and I saw and observed religion in my childhood; and these people are religious. I was a member of the Communist Party for twelve years and I know something of the politics and psychology of rebellion. These people have had as their daily existence such politics. These emotions are my instruments. They are emotions, but I'm conscious of them as emotions. I want to use these emotions to try to find out what these people think and feel and why.<sup>77</sup>

As in *Black Voices* and *Black Power*, Wright insists on an emotional expressiveness alongside his use of social fact in composing such narratives: "I try to float these facts," Wright contends, "on a sea of emotion, to drive them home with some degree of artistic power, as much as humanly possible, to the level of seriousness which characterizes science."<sup>78</sup>

Wright amplifies these ideas in *The Color Curtain* by providing extensive documented evidence alongside his assembled dramatic dialogues, personal meditations, and descriptions of everyday Indonesian life. As in *Black Voices* and *Black Power*, his is the central consciousness of the text, carefully controlling the on-site conference speeches, the recreated dialogue, and the interviews in which his interviewees are denoted by their representativeness (e.g., the Indonesian-born European, 454; the Roman Catholic Singaporean journalist, 455; the Eurasian, 464; the imperialistic Dutch, 577, etc.) and described without any kind of "unique voice"<sup>79</sup> or distinctive tone or inflection. This carefully controlled narrative restrictiveness echoes Wright's technique in *Black Voices*, in which the narrator prohibits the existence of a verbally and semantically autonomous character and does not allow a character's speech to dominate the formulation of a belief system.

For example, in *The Color Curtain*, Wright's interview with the anonymous "Eurasian," Mr. X, is dominated by the narrator's response to the Eurasian's "psychological reaction[s]" and his summary of the interviewee's personal history and positions on Asian culture and politics: "He is married, fifty years of age, has six children. . . . He feels that the state should not have anything actively to do with religion. . . . He feels that the overrunning of the continents of Asia and Africa by the white Western nations was a mixture of good and bad. . . . He attends many international conferences but feels that the Asian-African Conference is but a political gesture to bolster the local political regime in Indonesia."<sup>80</sup> The narrator's summaries and confirmations about Mr. X almost seem to precede Mr. X's stated positions, as opposed to

coming after them. In the process, the narrator's interpretive prose buries the reported speech. Typically, the narrator concludes the interview in the form of summary statements and personal evaluations, and once again, as in *Black Voices* and *Black Power*, highlights a consciously created persona that exudes an image of self-absorption and introspection:

There was no doubt, in my mind, that my Indonesian educator was correct on the plane of abstract logic, but logic cannot solve problems whose solutions come not by thinking but by living. His approach implied a denial of collective thought processes, of mass organic experiences embedded in the very lives and social conditions about him. . . . Regrettably, one could safely assume that his influence upon Asian reality would be nil.<sup>81</sup>

By this approach, Wright could be accused of trying to have it both ways: his concentration on social fact (e.g., the scientific field worker using the same questionnaire for all the people he interviews) fuses with his subjective interpretations that foreground the “artistic power” of his emotional and spiritual inclusions. Wright presents this persona as “a super intellectual and visionary acutely perceptive of world affairs and Western threats more than anyone else,”<sup>82</sup> which echoes his own attempts—from the beginning of his exile period (1946) until his death (1960)—to seek a new role in the world as a public intellectual and activist.<sup>83</sup> Thus, as in his fiction, Wright's literary journalism employs ethnographic and scholarly research for polemical purposes in order to change existing social beliefs and perceptions.

These purposes go hand in hand with the views and techniques of his transnational modernism. Besides linking literary forms to traditional techniques of news reporting, Wright also links such forms in *The Color Curtain* to the fields of ethnography, history, anthropology, and psychology. *The Color Curtain* is especially concerned with adding the psychological (a traditional high modernist mainstay) to Wright's modes of assessment. Thus, throughout *The Color Curtain*, he focuses on a variety of what he implies are psychological pressures:

[Asian and African] countries feel that if they do not become quickly modern, if they do not measure up to the West almost overnight, they will be swallowed up again in what they feel to be slavery.<sup>84</sup>

Asian and African populations had been subjugated on the assumption that they were in some way biologically inferior and unfit to govern themselves, and the white Western World that had shackled them had either given them a Christian religion or else had made them agonizingly conscious of their old, traditional religions to which they had had to cling under conditions of imperial rule.<sup>85</sup>

A central question he poses in the text, crucial as well to the interviews he conducts—“What, psychologically, did the politics of the whites do to the people of Asia and Africa?”<sup>86</sup>—underlies his study of Asian and African subjects. Wright combines psychological “reports” with personal narrative to produce an alternative to contemporary psychoanalytic analyses. As Dorothy Stringer argues in her study on *Black Power*:

[W]here the mainstream psychoanalytic theory of Wright’s day avoided historical questions, passed over racial difference without comment, and evinced a strong Eurocentric, individualist and bourgeois bias, [Wright’s work, like] African American literature [in general] emphasizes the collective traumas of the slave regime, insists on the persistence of racial injustice, and explores present-day, psychic responses to historical disaster.<sup>87</sup>

*The Color Curtain* is Wright’s critical effort to produce a productive tension between the cultures he describes and psychoanalytic theory. As Stringer notes, “Wright’s re-thinking emphasizes an aspect of modern experience wholly unanticipated by metropolitan psychological theories, including that intrinsic to African American literature.”<sup>88</sup> I would add, however, that it is Wright’s blend of the psychological and political that gives the narratively unorthodox *Color Curtain* its response, as a transmodernist text, to journalism at large and to conventional narrative forms in general.

The overall point here is that Wright’s literary journalism in *Black Voices*, *Black Power*, and *The Color Curtain* relies on a cohesively distinct cultural (and cross-cultural) role in its narrative intentions. It follows, then, that specific theories and concepts of literary journalism are required to account for this role. In functional terms, Wright wants his narratives to matter; he always *presumes* a cultural and racial relevance. In formal and aesthetic terms, he wants to explore new rhetorical ground, centering, most importantly, on the power and effect of a modernist fictionality. At the same time, the rhetorical distinctiveness of Wright’s literary journalism is always concerned with a communicative alignment and coherence between fictional and nonfictional discourses. For Wright, fictionality (especially in its modernistic forms) is a rhetorical source integral to the direct and pragmatic use of language within a real-world (Depression-era America, independence-movement Africa, a financially repressed Indonesia) urgency and context.<sup>89</sup>

Finally, it’s important to note that his literary journalism, in the mid- and late 1950s, flowed naturally from his increasing status as a humanist “citizen of the world” and from his stated goals as a writer: “to create new life by intensifying the sensibilities and to work toward world understanding by improving living conditions.”<sup>90</sup> Especially during his exile period, Wright could only adhere to a form of writing based on a response to dominant (clas-

sical, high) modernist modes and founded on personal perception—a crucial feature of literary journalism: “[T]he artist must bow to the monitor of his own imagination: must be led by the sovereignty of his own impressions and perceptions; must be guided by the tyranny of what troubles and concerns him personally.”<sup>91</sup>

### *PAGAN SPAIN (1957)*

Published in 1957, *Pagan Spain* is Wright’s only literary-journalistic book about a European country, and one of his few works not outwardly about race. Wright’s primary thesis is that Spain, an apparently Catholic country, was actually more pagan than Christian, that Spaniards were trapped under the cruel dictates of censorship and dictatorship, and that Spain, sexually repressed, was an isolationist culture fixated on the past. Based on trips Wright took to Spain in 1954 and 1955, *Pagan Spain* is his chronicle against an unconscious irrationality that he believes had “feudalized” the country.

Like Wright’s other exile works that are not straightforward fictions, *Pagan Spain* is difficult to categorize. Simultaneously anthropologist, ethnographer, historian, “writer,” tourist, Wright contravenes the genre of travel literature (the standard label given to *Pagan Spain*) by making the work “a highly poetic social and political dialectic”<sup>92</sup>—traits not traditionally associated with travel literature. Upon its release in 1957, Herbert Matthews, in a review for the *New York Times*, called *Pagan Spain* “a provocative, disturbing, and, at times, sensational book.”<sup>93</sup> Another early reviewer, Richard Strout, argued, “There are so many ways of misunderstanding this vivid book of travel-journalism that it is likely to kick up a controversy—a Negro writing about whites, a man of Protestant background appalled by the degradation of a quasi Church-state, an expatriate drawing upon his native land for occasional comparisons, an ex-radical describing Franco’s Falange.”<sup>94</sup> Characterizing *Pagan Spain*’s method, the back cover blurb of the Harper Perennial edition (1995) perhaps comes closest to the mark by baldly asserting that Wright “brilliantly expanded his literary horizons with *Pagan Spain*.”<sup>95</sup> It can be argued that this is (at least partially) the case because, as with *Black Voices*, *Black Power*, and *The Color Curtain*, *Pagan Spain* relies on techniques traditionally belonging to fiction while expounding Wright’s particular notion of a transnational modernity, a sort of exceptional modernism.

At the beginning of *Pagan Spain*, Wright recalls his response to the Spanish Civil War when he was a reporter for the *Daily Worker* and presents his reasons for writing the work:

During the Spanish Civil War I had published, in no less than the New York Daily Worker, some harsh judgments concerning Franco; and the

dive bombers and tanks of Hitler and Mussolini had brutally justified those judgments. The fate of Spain had hurt me, had haunted me; I had never been able to stifle a hunger to understand what had happened there and why.<sup>96</sup>

Here Wright, echoing his similar justification for going to the Gold Coast in *Black Power* and for traveling to Indonesia in *The Color Curtain*, establishes his narrative authority, conjoining it with his self-identification as a narrator:

God knows, totalitarian governments and ways of life were no mysteries to me. I had been born under an absolutistic racist regime in Mississippi; I had lived and worked for twelve years under the political dictatorship of the communist party of the United States; and I had spent a year of my life under the police terror of Peron in Buenos Aires.<sup>97</sup>

Part and parcel of this identification, Wright offers his philosophy on religion in the opening pages of the book:

I have no religion in the formal sense of the word . . . I have no race except that which is forced upon me. I have no country except that to which I'm obliged to belong. I have no traditions. I'm free. I have only the future.<sup>98</sup>

As suggested by these passages, *Pagan Spain* can be seen to be more about Wright than about Spain. Above all, it is a personal report that describes a country still suffering from the Spanish Civil War and the fascist Falangist party. Paralleling this (politicized) self-reflexivity, it portrays a narrator who (in seeing the Moorish ruins of Granada) clearly realizes his own modernity: "My twentieth-century hunger could not be sated here. These moss-covered ruins were far less interesting to me than those landscapes of subjective ruins that strew our world today—ruins that were harder to detect and much more difficult to appreciate."<sup>99</sup> This subjectively styled modernism, whose concerns were constructing "more self-aware and complex collectivities,"<sup>100</sup> dominated Wright's output in the 1950s.

Arguably the most novelistic of Wright's literary-journalistic books, *Pagan Spain*, in approach and technique, is a compendium of first-person narration, participant-observer witnessing, character sketches, eyewitness reporting, and dramatic monologues and dialogues. Reminiscent of his recently published novel *The Outsider* (1953), Wright incorporated his interest in pulp fiction and the crime novel into several of his descriptions in *Pagan Spain*. In his first confrontation with the Spanish Civil Guard, for example, he fearfully comments: "I blinked, understanding nothing; I was in a police state and I thought: This is it. . . ."<sup>101</sup> In another encounter with the Civil Guard—this one on the coastal road to Barcelona, Wright recounts:

I drove over the bridge and rolled on, uncertain, feeling a naked vulnerability creeping down the skin of my back. I was not accustomed to armed strangers of unknown motives standing in my rear and I waited to hear a raatatatatat and feel hot slugs of steel crashing into my car and into my flesh.<sup>102</sup>

Wright also resorts to such techniques as detecting and interpreting the thoughts of others (a conventional fictional device), as he does in this Barcelona scene when two young men he has met help him find a “pension”:

It was beginning to make sense; I was a heathen and these devout boys were graciously coming to my rescue. In their spontaneous embrace of me they were acting out a role that had been implanted in them since childhood. I was not only a stranger, but a “lost” one in dire need of being saved. Yet there was no condescension in their manner; they acted with the quiet assurance of men who knew that they had the truth in existence and they were offering it to me.<sup>103</sup>

Wright’s interest in religion as a social phenomenon (e.g., 12–15), his ethnographic interpretation of the social expectations of Spanish sexual behavior (e.g., 177–181), his fascination with the plight of Protestants (e.g., 162), his interest in the psychological and everyday Spanish life (e.g., 156), his debunking of Catholic ritual (e.g., 280–283)—all of these subjects are filtered through his fictional techniques. Thus *Pagan Spain*, in its style of representation (i.e., the panoply of subjects, discourse, and disciplines), is hybridic, working toward what Wright conceived of as a cosmopolitan “genre”—what I’m terming a transnational modernism—simultaneously expository, ethnographic, and literary journalistic.<sup>104</sup>

One narrative result of this genre in *Pagan Spain* can be seen in Wright’s depiction of women. Often criticized for his problematic portrayals of women, particularly in his fiction,<sup>105</sup> Wright focuses on the suffering and fortitude of Spanish women in *Pagan Spain*:

The daily striving and suffering of Spanish women make what little structure there is to Spanish society, knitting together in a web of care and love what would otherwise be a landscape of senseless anarchy.<sup>106</sup>

The mighty maternal instinct of the Spanish woman is the anchor of responsibility that holds the ship of Spanish life steady while the Spanish man babbles abstract nonsense in the countless smoky coffee houses.<sup>107</sup>

As Dennis F. Evans has noted, “[I]n *Pagan Spain*, Wright’s report on the treatment of Spanish women—their social, political, and religious indoctrination and subjugation, and their stigmatized, yet unavoidable participation in prostitution and white slavery—is uncharacteristically empathetic and gives a view of Wright that is unavailable in any of his other works, both travel and fictional.”<sup>108</sup>

But I would add that Wright's sympathetic portrayal of women must be placed both in a social or gendered sense and in the broader context of religion. As the narrator argues, "*All was religion in Spain*,"<sup>109</sup> and for Wright, women are the first to suffer from this fact: "[G]iven the conditions, the moral attitude of the Church toward sex, the poverty, the ignorance, this was bound to be. It was all socially determined."<sup>110</sup> When describing the plight of Spanish women, Wright abandons his usual sociological and ethnographic discourse and rarely relies on social statistics. Instead, he focuses on the larger force of Catholicism, specifically the rigid expectation that a Spanish woman must be a virgin when she marries, a cultural fact contrasting to the massive problem of female prostitution in Spain.<sup>111</sup> Although indeed victims of cultural forces stemming from "the Spanish religion and its effects,"<sup>112</sup> women are portrayed most powerfully as images representing the present condition of Spain. Under this method, it is no surprise that the dominant typology for women is their association with the Virgin Mary:

women who plow the fields; who wash clothes in country streams; who drive the oxen-drawn carts; who satisfy their men and nurse their babies; and who, at the beginning and the end of the day, creep forward and kneel humbly before the weeping and jeweled Virgins in the dim and drafty cathedrals.<sup>113</sup>

Women are also, as Wright makes clear, the material and psychological symbols of Spain. From his 1955 trip to Spain, he describes this scene in Hendaye at the Franco-Spanish border:

The women's dresses clung to their misshapen bodies; the men's ragged shirts bagged about their shoulders and hips. Then came that immemorial symbol of Spain: an old woman whose head was covered with a dirty cloth hobbled alongside her heaped and donkey-drawn cart.<sup>114</sup>

As evidenced here and throughout *Pagan Spain*, Wright requires us to read referentially and figuratively/fictionally at once; these elements serve as a basic framework on which to build an interpretation, comprehend his anti-essentialist concept of race, and enter into his vision of modernism.

Similar to his portrayal of Spanish women, Wright adopts a generally symbolic stance in examining the pervasive force of poverty in Spain. Recalling *Black Voices* and *Black Power*, the symbolic significance of poverty becomes the foundation for several of Wright's literary-journalistic representations:

Next morning I boarded a bus for Seville and arrived during the sultry afternoon. I was in the capital of Andalusia, the city whose cathedral held the body of Christopher Columbus. Though rich in oranges, sugar beets, olives, wheat, rice, the impression of poverty was so all-pervading, touching so many levels of life that, after an hour, poverty seemed to be the normal

lot of man; I had to make an effort to remember that people lived better lives elsewhere.<sup>115</sup>

In Grenada, Wright depicts Senora Flamenco's apartment as "proclaiming pride and poverty" in its every detail,<sup>116</sup> a descriptor that applies, more generally, to all "the people of Spain [who] are suffering."<sup>117</sup> (*Pagan*, 200). Poverty stands in contrast, Wright asserts, to the precious and luxurious shrines and cathedrals that dot the Spanish landscape, including the Loyola shrine:

If one accepted the premise that this was a gateway to eternal bliss, one had to endorse the manner in which the rich beauty of this shrine contrasted with the squalor and misery that lay about it.<sup>118</sup>

Poverty degrades human relationships, subverts relational norms, and fuels class divisions, but it also drives its victims toward a powerful, passionate force—the Catholic Church (however delusional and misguided this force is, in Wright's view): "Spanish Catholicism was one of the odd fatalities of the world."<sup>119</sup> Wright comments,

Back of the indigenous poverty and supporting it is a naively pagan attitude toward life that is the opposite of the practical: a love of ritual and ceremony; a delight in color and movement and sound and harmony; an extolling of sheer emotion as the veritable end of human striving; a deification of tradition that lifts them out of the world that is shared by most of Western mankind . . . all of which finds its ultimate sanction and justification in the practices and canons of Spanish Catholicism.<sup>120</sup>

Wright connects poverty to other kinds of images as well; for example, it easily elides into his landscape descriptions:

Scrubby trees struggled to grow on gruesome mountaintops. It was a melancholy world with a spell of sadness haunting it.

Each little village of squat, clay-colored houses was different from the last, yet somehow they were all alike, clinging precariously to the slopes of bleak and crumbly mountains.<sup>121</sup>

Poverty is a distinct mindset in *Pagan Spain*, exposing an essential structure and ethical viewpoint that Wright constantly returns to in his interpretations of Spain's "paganism" and "feudalism." Wright's environmental and circumstantial explanations of poverty hinge on what he sees as the stories of Spain's ruined (and anachronistic) spiritual world.

#### CONCLUSION

Wright's biographer Hazel Rowley argues that "*Pagan Spain* contains absorbing stories, interesting characters, first-rate dialogue. More than simply a travel essay, it is personal, subjective, and controversial." She

additionally asserts, “Wright’s narrative voice—personal, honest, wry, humorous, and occasionally self-mocking—in many ways resembles the voice of ‘New Journalism’ in the mid-1960s.”<sup>122</sup> Although *Pagan Spain* does carry such 1960s New Journalistic features as scene-by-scene construction, a full record of dialogue, manifold incidental details to develop character, et cetera—and in a certain way is a kind of “fact reporting”<sup>123</sup>—the work is too literary, too socially polemical, and too hybridic to fit well into this category. *Pagan Spain*, at its heart, is one of Wright’s efforts to mourn the damage inflicted by modern capitalism in its conjunction with traditional religion. That *Pagan Spain*’s narrator “had not been prepared for what he encountered”<sup>124</sup> is reflected in the discontinuous, multi-disciplinary, and appropriately modernist form of the work.

The variety of Wright’s techniques renders his work interdisciplinary, even multidisciplinary, which takes the reader far beyond a New Journalism, documentary, or travel literature genre or register. The dynamic language and contradictory politics of Wright’s journalism contribute to the rhetorical sophistication of his fiction and give it the potential power to question and redefine narrative forms of the mid-twentieth century. Wright is a disturbingly unrecognized player in this redirection: his contributions to an African American journalistic and literary journalistic tradition have been unfairly neglected. At the same time, analyses of his most successful fiction, with their safer narrative boundaries, continue to dominate the criticism.

There is hope, however, in the persistence of literary-journalistic representation itself. In his long-form literary journalism, beginning with *12 Million Black Voices*, and continuing with *Black Power*, *The Color Curtain*, and *Pagan Spain*, Wright undertook a transposition of conventional narrative forms that eventually converted journalism into a vehicle for a theory of contemporary reality. This conversion incorporated sermonizing traditions, jeremiads, personifications, documentary film, photojournalistic techniques, and fiction to create a certain alternate racial history, vision, and humanism. Wright’s literary journalism introduces a disruption or disequilibrium into a storyteller’s and interpreter’s mental model of the world evoked by a world that is presented as actual. His use, then, of this narrative form should be seen not only as a crucial part of his intellectual and artistic growth but also as his distinct claim to a transnational modernism.

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## NOTES

1. Although offering a helpful overview of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century black press, *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Todd Vogel (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), is representative of the scant coverage given to Wright's journalism. Vogel's critical collection devotes only four pages to Wright, focusing on his 1951 piece for *Ebony*, "The Shame of Chicago." Surprisingly, there have been no individual or collective studies on the substantial journalism/literary journalism that Wright wrote for the *Daily Worker*, the *New Masses*, *Harper's Magazine*, and other important journals and magazines of the American 1930s and 1940s.

2. Much work still needs to be done in defining "literary journalism" as a multifarious, multigeneric, and multimedia field of study that can only be comprehensively addressed within international coordinates. I prefer the term literary journalism over nonfiction and other narrative classifications because the works by Wright I assign to this literary form are not merely editorials, essays, autobiographies, memoirs or travel narratives, as conventionally defined. What I am calling literary journalism in relation to Wright involves artistic practices that are used to investigate social, racial, cultural or political circumstances. I am most interested in writers who have first established themselves as fictionalists or have highly developed literary sensibilities, yet have written some of the most powerful polemical forms of literary journalism. Wright easily fits into this category.

3. In what follows, some of my ideas on Wright's "modernism" and exile writings draw on the arguments I presented in the introduction, chapter prefaces, and afterword of *Richard Wright: New Readings in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, eds. Alice Mikal Craven and William Dow (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1–8; 9–10; 69–70; 101–103; 167–170; 267–271; and in the chapter "Richard Wright," in *The Cambridge Companion to the American Novel*, ed. Timothy Parrish (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 156–167.

4. Michelle Stephens, "African-American Modernism," in *A Companion to the*

*Modern American Novel*, ed. John T. Matthews (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 307.

5. *Ibid.*, 318. One of Wright's preferred lifelong genres, as this essay argues, is literary journalism.

6. Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 187.

7. *Ibid.*, 184.

8. Paula Rabinowitz, "Savage Holiday: Documentary Noir and True Crime in *12 Million Black Voices*," in *Richard Wright: New Readings in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, eds. Alice Mikal Craven and William E. Dow (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 107.

9. Hubert Henry Harrison, "Our International Consciousness," in *When Africa Awakes* (1920; repr., Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1997), 100–101, 103.

10. Gavin Jones, *American Hungers: The Problems of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 148.

11. It should be noted that in 1938 the *Daily Worker* was the only white newspaper in the U.S. to employ black writers on its staff and to give regular space in its pages to black social issues.

12. Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, foreword by Noel Ignatiev, introduction by David Bradley (New York: Basic Books, 1941), 18. Published just months after the publication of his landmark novel, *Native Son* (1940), *Black Voices* (1941) marks Wright's distinctive shift from a fiction inflected by a sociological sensibility (*Native Son*) to a sociological discourse trading off with fictional forms (*Black Voices*)—resulting, as I will argue, in one of the most undervalued literary-journalistic texts of the American 1940s.

13. Brian Dolinar, "The Illinois Writers' Project Essays: Introduction," *Southern Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 85.

14. Carla Cappetti, *Writing Chicago: Modernism, Ethnography, and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 182.

15. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2004), 1401.

16. As Virginia Whatley Smith has noted, "[Wright] was writing in the late 1930s and early 1940s when documentary expressions—photographic texts, newspapers, periodicals, fiction and nonfiction et cetera—were intrinsic tools of proletarian writers, and Wright was no exception in integrating his training in journalism with his literature." The product of much of this integration, I will contend, is foremost literary-journalistic in nature. *Richard Wright's Travel Writings* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), 82.

17. Michael Thurston, *Making Something Happen* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 8.

18. *Ibid.*, 8. See Alan Wald's "Revolutionary Intellectuals: *Partisan Review* in the 1930s," in *Literature at the Barricades: The American Writer in the 1930s*, eds. Ralph F. Bogardus and Fred Hobson (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1982), 187–203.

19. This point can be made clearer in a comparative context. As Hazel Rowley

argues, “*12 Million Black Voices*, like all Wright’s writing, was driven by a passionate desire to bring about change. This was an important difference between him and the Chicago sociologists, who held the view that the good sociologist must be detached and apolitical.” *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 250.

20. William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 14.

21. Wright, *Black Voices*, 18.

22. Kenneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre, eds., *Conversations with Richard Wright* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 45.

23. Stott, *Documentary Expression*, 14.

24. Richard Wright, introduction to *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, by St. Clair Drake and Horace C. Cayton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), xxiii.

25. See Sara Blair, *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 76.

26. Wright was not alone in doing so. See, for example, James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), Agnes Smedley’s *Daughter of Earth* (1929), and Meridel LeSueur’s *Salute to Spring* (1940). On at least one level, I see *12 Million Black Voices* as a continuation and variation of Agee’s prefatory pronouncements in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in which he begins with the famous quotation from the Marx and Engels *Communist Manifesto* (1848): “Workers of the world, unite and fight. You have nothing to lose but your chains, and a world to win.” But then Agee relegates these words to a “second theme” and raises “the poetry facing them” to the first. See James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, A Death in the Family, Shorter Fiction* (New York: Library of America, 2005), 13.

27. It must be noted that Wright’s “we” in the text is multireferential and heavily gendered, at times referring to slaves (31), sharecroppers (31), migrants (35), cotton workers (38, 49); at others referring to those blacks who fear being lynched (46), homeowners (47), tenant farmers (56), churchgoers (73), city dwellers under Jim Crow law (99), and manual laborers (117).

28. Jeff Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 138

29. *Ibid.*, 138.

30. The literary influences inherent in *Black Voices* reflect Wright’s consideration that “Eliot, Stein, Joyce, Proust, Hemingway; and Anderson; Gorky, Barbusse, Nexo, and Jack London no less than the folklore of the Negro himself should form the heritage of the Negro Writer.” “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie McKay, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Norton, 2004), 1407.

31. Michael Coyle, ed., *Ezra Pound and African American Modernism* (Orano, ME: American Poetry Foundation, 2001), 86.

32. Wright, *Black Voices*, 10.

33. Terence Patrick Murphy, “The Uncertainties of Conversational Exchange:

Dialogue Monitoring as a Function of the Narrative Voice," *Style* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 398.

34. *Ibid.*, 399.

35. Wright, *Black Voices*, 11.

36. *Ibid.*, 10, 13.

37. Examinations of the discursive formations of the "we" and "you" in African American literature and African American literary journalism are oddly lacking in the criticism on narrative address and in African American studies in general. Although this is not the place for such a study, Wright's use of the we and direct address in *Black Voices* is certainly part of a narrative tradition beginning with the authors of slave narratives (Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass), abolitionist writing (George W. Clark), and antislavery publications (William Wells Brown) and extending to such fiction and nonfiction writers as Du Bois, Jean Toomer, Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, and James Baldwin. Toomer's *Cane* (1923) is an especially interesting case of how a narrator wishes to inspire actual readers with the "you" in the text. *Cane's* narrator, by directly addressing a witnessing community, prepares a participation that not only intensifies his voice in the community, but also allows him to become the community's spokesperson and storyteller.

38. Carla Cappetti, "Sociology of an Existence: Richard Wright and the Chicago School," *MELUS* 12, no. 2, (Summer 1985): 28.

39. Jeff Allred, "From Eye to We: Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*, Documentary, and Pedagogy,"

*American Literature* 78, no. 2 (September 2006): 551.

40. Wright, *Black Voices*, 26.

41. St. Clair Drake and Horace C. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 8, 17.

42. Wright, *Black Voices*, 18.

43. *Ibid.*, 21.

44. *Ibid.*, 41.

45. *Ibid.*, 35.

46. *Ibid.*, xx.

47. Ann Petry, "The Novel as Social Criticism," in *The Writer's Book*, ed. Helen Hull (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1956), 37.

48. See Allred, "From Eye to We," 550.

49. For instance, see Virginia Whatley Smith, ed., *Richard Wright's Travel Writings: New Reflections* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), xi–xv.

50. Judith Hamera and Alfred Bendixen, eds., and introduction, *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3, 2.

51. *Ibid.*, 3.

52. Whatley Smith, *Richard Wright's Travel Writings*, xii.

53. Richard Wright, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*, in *Black Power: Three Books from Exile: Black Power; The Color Curtain; and White Man, Listen!* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 3.

54. Ibid., 13.
55. Ibid., 415.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 415–16.
58. Eric Schocket, *Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 255.
59. Wright, *Black Power*, 56, 59.
60. Sara Blair, *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 104.
61. Wright, *Black Voices*, 72.
62. Kinnamon and Fabre, *Conversations*, 240.
63. Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Richard Wright and Racial Discourse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 117.
64. Jack B. Moore, “A Personal Appreciation of Richard Wright’s Universality,” *The Mississippi Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (Spring 1997). Web. 25 August 2012.
65. For an examination of *Black Power* as a “novel,” see Jack B. Moore, “The Art of *Black Power*: Novelistic or Documentary,” *Revue Française d’Etudes Américaines* 31 (February 1987): 79–91.
66. Fred R. Conkling, “Wright Sees West Africa in Turmoil,” *Fort Wayne News Sentinel*, October 9, 1954.
67. Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain*, in *Black Power: Three Books from Exile*, 441.
68. See Amritjit Singh, afterword, *Black Power: Three Books from Exile*, 615.
69. For various discussions of this relationship, see the introduction and chapter prefaces of *Richard Wright: New Readings in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, eds. Alice Mikal Craven and William E. Dow (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
70. Kinnamon and Fabre, *Conversations*, 439.
71. Ibid., 189.
72. Wright, *Color Curtain*, 493.
73. Ibid., 498.
74. Ibid., 503.
75. Ibid., 586.
76. Ibid., 440.
77. Ibid., 440–41.
78. Horace Cayton, “Discriminations—America: Frightened Children of Frightened Parents,” *Twice-a-Year* 12–13 (1945), 263.
79. John Reilly, “Richard Wright and the Art of Non-Fiction: Stepping Out on the Stage of the World,” *Callaloo* 9, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 512.
80. Wright, *Color Curtain*, 464–65.
81. Ibid., 471.
82. Virginia Whatley Smith, ed., “Richard Wright’s Passage to Indonesia,” in *Richard Wright’s Travel Writings: New Reflections* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 99.
83. About this role, see John Lowe, “Richard Wright and the CircumCarib-

bean,” in *Richard Wright: New Readings in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, eds. Alice Mikal Craven and William E. Dow (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 249–66.

84. Wright, *Color Curtain*, 568.

85. *Ibid.*, 542.

86. *Ibid.*, 551.

87. Dorothy Stringer, “Psychology and Black Liberation in Richard Wright’s *Black Power* (1954),” *Journal of Modern Literature* 32, no. 4 (Summer 2009): 106.

88. *Ibid.*, 106.

89. I am indebted here to Richard Walsh’s conception of fictional discourse and narrative pragmatics. See Richard Walsh, “The Pragmatics of Narrative Fiction” in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, eds. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2008), 150–64.

90. Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), 203.

91. Michel Fabre, *The World of Richard Wright* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 67.

92. Dennis F. Evans, “The Good Women, Bad Women, Prostitutes and Slaves of *Pagan Spain*,” in *Richard Wright’s Travel Writings: New Reflections*, ed. Virginia Whatley Smith (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 166.

93. Ellen Ann Fentress, “Journalism: *Pagan Spain* by Richard Wright,” *Oxford American: The Southern Magazine of Good Writing* (August 27, 2012). Web. 14 Sept. 2012.

94. Richard Strout, “Richard Wright’s Spanish Excursion,” *The New Republic* 136 (February 18, 1957), 18.

95. Richard Wright, *Pagan Spain* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995), back cover text.

96. Wright, *Pagan Spain*, 4.

97. *Ibid.*

98. *Ibid.*, 21.

99. *Ibid.*, 192.

100. Jeff Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 135.

101. Wright, *Pagan Spain*, 5.

102. *Ibid.*, 8.

103. *Ibid.*, 12.

104. After the publication of *The Outsider* (1953), Wright was experimenting with various nonfiction genres conducive to what he wished to express internationally. Based on his belief in the primacy of personal perception, he made this statement in 1954: “I’m inclined to feel that I ought not to work right now on a novel. This does not mean that I’m giving up writing fiction, but, really, there are so many more exciting and interesting things happening now in the world that I feel sort of dodging them if I don’t say something about them.” John Lowe, “Richard Wright as Traveler/Ethnographer,” in *Richard Wright’s Travel Writings: New Reflections*, 119.

105. See, for example, Mary K. Moore, “Bitches, Whores, and Women Haters:

Archetypes and Typologies in the Art of Richard Wright,” in *Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Richard Macksey and Frank E. Moorer (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984), 117–27; and Nagueyalti Warren, “Black Girls and Native Sons: Female Images in Selected Works by Richard Wright,” in *Richard Wright: Myths and Realities*, ed. C. James Trotman (New York: Garland, 1988), 59–77.

106. Wright, *Pagan Spain*, 220.

107. *Ibid.*, 220–221.

108. Dennis F. Evans, “The Good Women, Bad Women, Prostitutes and Slaves of *Pagan Spain*,” in *Richard Wright’s Travel Writings: New Reflections*, ed. Virginia Whatley Smith (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 167. Wright has many moments of sympathetically portraying black women in *Black Voices*, *The Long Dream* (1958), and “Long Black Song” (1938). For a reassessment of Wright’s views on gender, see Barbara Foley’s “A Dramatic Picture . . . of Women from Feudalism to Fascism”: Richard Wright’s *Black Hope*,” in *Richard Wright in a Post-Racial Imaginary*, eds. Alice Mikal Craven and William E. Dow (New York: Continuum, forthcoming 2014).

109. Wright, *Pagan Spain*, 229.

110. *Ibid.*, 218.

111. *Ibid.*, 177.

112. *Ibid.*, 231.

113. *Ibid.*, 221.

114. *Ibid.*, 233.

115. *Ibid.*, 209.

116. *Ibid.*, 199.

117. *Ibid.*, 200.

118. *Ibid.*, 234.

119. *Ibid.*, 274.

120. *Ibid.*, 178.

121. *Ibid.*, 136.

122. Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 476.

123. Gay Talese, et al., “The New Journalism,” *Writer’s Digest* (January 1970), 34.

124. Wright, *Pagan Spain*, 227.