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“Sketches of Spain”: Richard Wright’s *Pagan Spain* and African-American Representations of the Hispanic

GUY REYNOLDS

“SPAIN IS PRIMITIVE, BUT LOVELY”

At the start of *Pagan Spain*¹ (1957), Richard Wright recalled a 1946 conversation with Gertrude Stein; she encouraged him to visit Spain: “‘You’ll see what the Western world is made of. Spain is primitive, but lovely.’”² Wright meditated on his fascination with that country, an obsession rooted in the Civil War’s political upheaval: “The fate of Spain hurt me, haunted me; I was never able to stifle a hunger to understand what had happened there and why” (*PS*, 10). Wright wrote as a leftist, as a political writer who had published anti-Franco articles. In his interest in Spain, and especially in his “hunger to understand” its fate after the fall of the Republic, Wright kept company with many mid-century American artists. Hemingway is the most famous instance of a writer engaged with Spanish affairs, but forms of Hispanophilia have marked the lives of many writers and painters. In his account of a trip to Madrid in 1947, Saul Bellow recalled: “‘And then of course I had followed the Spanish Civil War and knew as much about what had gone on in Spain between 1936–8

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¹ My title plays, of course, with the title of Miles Davis’s album, *Sketches of Spain* (1960). The sleeve notes, by *The Jazz Review*’s Nat Hentoff, describe an intense engagement between the African-American musician and Spanish folk-music: “What is most remarkable is the surprising authenticity of phrasing and timbre with which he plays. It is as if Miles had been born of Andalusian gypsies.”

² Richard Wright, *Pagan Spain* (1957; London: Bodley Head, 1960), 10. Future references in the text are to this edition, and are cited as *PS*. Spellings are in accord with this British edition. Stein’s work on Spanish themes concentrated on Spain as crucible of modern art. See the two pieces, “Picasso” (1911/12) and “The Life of Juan Gris/The Life and Death of Juan Gris” (1927) in Ulla E. Dydo, ed., *A Stein Reader* (Evanston, III.: Northwestern U.P., 1993), 142–43, 536–37.

as a young American of that time could learn.”³ At around that time, the Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell was creating his series of *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, a parade of largely black canvases dominated by oblique representations of archetypal Spanish subjects such as bullfighting. As Arthur Danto has written of these images: “‘Spain’ denotes a land of suffering and poetic violence and political agony, and ‘Elegy’ carries the literary weight of tragedy and disciplined lamentation.”⁴

Pagan Spain takes as its context a literary and intellectual climate formed by these writers and artists. Wright came to Spain in the wake of the literary and artistic avant-garde exemplified by Stein, Motherwell and Hemingway. But he also arrived in a country encountered and represented by a clutch of African-American writers. Although the progenitor of Wright’s trip was Gertrude Stein, the journey into Spain was to become a mapping of Wright’s racial and cultural identity as a black American Protestant. And in exploring his fascination with Spain, Wright edged himself into a specific literary genealogy: a chain of black American writers who found in Spain a fascinating cultural zone: a site of seduction and fascination, a space of contested cultural meanings. Wright’s journey was framed by the context of late American modernism, but it was equally framed by African-American writing. As M. Lynn Weiss notes, in one of few specific accounts of *Pagan Spain*, the “larger ambition” was ‘to place the history of African-Americans (and particularly Wright’s own history) in a global context.’⁵ Weiss charts that “ambition” by looking at *Pagan Spain* in the context of Wright’s *œuvre* or via analogues with white American writing about the Iberian peninsula. She notes Wright’s meeting with Hemingway in 1937 at the second American Writers’ Congress in New York, mentions his contact with Stein, and concludes that “Wright was especially conscious of this literary tradition and of his

³ Saul Bellow, “A Half Life: An Autobiography in Ideas,” *Bostonia* (Nov.–Dec. 1990), reprinted in Gloria L. Cronin and Ben Siegel, eds., *Conversations with Saul Bellow* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 248–77: 274. Bellow playfully suggested he might have been reincarnated from a Mediterranean ancestor, such was his sense of homecoming in Spain.

⁴ Arthur Danto, *Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present* (New York: Noonday Press, 1991), 195. A useful collection of Motherwell paintings, which includes many examples of the elegies is *Robert Motherwell*, with a text by H. H. Arnason, 2nd edn (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1982).

⁵ M. Lynn Weiss, “Para Usted: Richard Wright’s *Pagan Spain*,” in Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich, eds., *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture* (Cambridge, Mass. And London: Harvard University Press, 1994), 212–25, 213.

place in it.”⁶ But it seems equally likely that Wright was working within, and against, specifically black forms of written engagement with this land.

Take, for instance, Nella Larsen. Applying for a Guggenheim Foundation award in November 1929, Larsen specifically contrasted America with France and Spain, and argued for the “intellectual and physical freedom for the Negro” in Europe. She received a grant in 1930 and, after residence in Paris, travelled through Andalusia and Majorca in 1931–32.⁷ Her biographer, Thadious Davis, notes rather listless journeys amongst the Anglo-American expatriates of Spain; Larsen’s great claims for Spain failed to generate new writing. Meanwhile, Claude McKay was writing in Bilbao, Madrid and Barcelona. He spent the winter and spring of 1929–30 in Spain, and produced the manuscript “The Jungle and the Bottoms” (he later rejected the text for publication). McKay, Jamaican-born and sometime editor of the *Liberator*, shared the interest in Spain which has affected many American artists: “I am glad I shall at last grow romantic about some country,” he wrote to his agent.⁸ At the end of his life McKay became a Catholic; he credited his conversion partly to a recognition of the faith’s power when he was in Spain. However, in his autobiography, *A Long Way From Home* (1937), McKay stressed Spain’s significance as a hybridized place where one found antique Catholicism in close proximity to North Africa and Islam. Travelling between mainland Europe and his home in Morocco, McKay understood Spain as a transitional site: “Once again in Spain, I inspected the great Moorish landmarks. And more clearly I saw Spain outlined as the antique bridge between Africa and Europe.”⁹

But the central encounter in this cross-cultural tradition was the meeting between Langston Hughes and Spain. Hughes was asked by the *Baltimore Afro-American* to go to Spain during the Civil War because he spoke the language (he learnt it when staying with his father in Mexico). Hughes’s account of Spain in his autobiographical memoir, *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956), deploys a now-familiar romanticism: “One of my dreams had always been to go to Spain,” he writes. “I had touched Spain briefly

⁶ Ibid., 222.

⁷ Thadious M. Davis, *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman’s Life Unveiled* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1994), 345 cites Larsen’s Guggenheim application and goes on to discuss her travels in Spain (367–69, 372–83).

⁸ Claude McKay to William Bradley, cited in Wayne F. Cooper, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 266.

⁹ Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home* (1937; London: Pluto Press, 1985), 309. This autobiography also includes McKay’s three sonnets “for Barcelona,” 326–27.

during my days as a seaman – Valencia and Alicante – but had not been able to go inland. I loved what I saw then of Spain.”¹⁰ Hughes was effectively a war correspondent in Spain, but he took an explicitly African-American line on the War’s racial dimensions, for instance Franco’s decision to deploy North African troops. For Hughes, the Moorish ancestry of Spain is both evident and significant. He remarks on the traces of “Moorish blood” still visible in the population.¹¹ Hughes here developed a more nuanced and sophisticated response to Spain than that seen in his early political poetry. His writing from the 1930s had tended to overlook the larger historical narrative of Spain in favour of a narrowly propagandizing immediacy. Poems such as “Hero – International Brigade” and “Madrid – 1937” are examples of competent agitprop poetry, but nothing more. They invoke and reinstate a familiar iconography of heroism and battle-sites, but do little to forge a fresh language of political conflict. *I Wonder as I Wander* moves on from this classic leftist form towards a writing sensitized to the complexities of the struggle, particularly racial cross-currents: central passages of the reminiscence deal with the black presence amongst the Republicans. One chapter, “Negroes in Spain,” is a litany of names, an internationalized list that testifies to black presence:

At Villa Paz I saw also Ed White, one of the first two men of color to come to Spain in the original Lincoln Brigade. The other, Alonzo Watson, had been the first Negro slain in the Spanish War. In the hospital at Quinto I talked with Crawford Morgan of New York. Under treatment at Benicasim were Frank Alexander of Los Angeles, George Waters from San Francisco, Andrew Mitchell of Pittsburgh, Jeff Wideman and Henry George of Philadelphia, and Nathaniel Dickson of Chicago. In the various transport units there were a number of St. Louis Negroes – Tom Brown, Frank Warefield, Jimmy Cox, Larry Dukes, Walter Callum.¹²

For Hughes, to write about the Civil War as an African-American is to map Spain in terms of black presence. Hughes fashions positive representations; he seeks out examples of black sacrifice to position within a narrative about resistance to Fascism. Thus the elegiac ring to these sentences: “The other, Alonzo Watson, had been the first Negro slain in the Spanish War.” Hughes imagined Spain as a significant African-American *lieu de mémoire*, a site of memory, a place where history and private commemorative writing interacted.¹³

¹⁰ Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (1956; New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 315.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 351.

¹² *Ibid.*, 383.

¹³ The phrase “*lieu de mémoire*,” adopted from the French historian Pierre Nora, has proved suggestive for historians of African-American culture. Genevieve Fabre and

Published just before *Pagan Spain*, *I Wonder as I Wander* embraces some of the same concerns. Although there is no direct evidence that Wright’s text was written in counterpoint to that of Hughes, the long and close involvement of the two authors suggests a shared nexus of interests. In the mid 1930s Wright had enlisted Hughes’s support for *New Challenger* magazine; and during at least two periods of his life (1935 and 1951) Wright gave public lectures on Hughes’s work. Their two books might be read as a furtherance of a lifelong literary conversation, a dialogue which had now turned towards Spain.¹⁴ Hughes, for instance, anticipates the attentiveness to religion that will be such a major part of Wright’s study. He notes the Falangists’ religiosity: “The Falangist papers reaching Madrid were most religious, even running in their advertisements slogans such as VIVA CRISTO REY! VIVA FRANCO! as if Christ and the General were of equal importance.”¹⁵ What one sees here is the development of cultural politics: a writing alert to the structures of Spanish politics, culture and society. Hughes’s realization that even the secular world of politics is saturated by religious iconography anticipates Wright’s condemnation of Hispanic “paganism.” Hughes, in other words, adumbrated a reading of Spain that incorporated sociology and anthropology. As such, *I Wonder as I Wander* both anticipated and perhaps underpinned Wright’s attempt in *Pagan Spain* to decode the foundational principles of a foreign land.

What this genealogy of African-American writing about Spain demonstrates is an increasingly concrete awareness of Spanish politics and culture, and especially a sense of variegated identities within Spain. We might think of Hughes and Wright as authors who “write back” to Stein and Hemingway by telling other, overlooked Spanish stories. Stein had told Wright that Spain would demonstrate “what the Western world is made of”; but it was Wright, rather than Stein herself, who pursued an explication of what that phrase might mean. And for Wright, it was the “pagan” that constituted a Spanish ideology.

Robert O’Meally point to a “highly energized interaction of history and memory” at “the nexus of personal and collective memory.” “Introduction” to Fabre and O’Meally, eds., *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 7.

¹⁴ Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 2nd edn (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 142–43 details the *New Challenge* project (intriguingly, Claude McKay was also involved). Cf. 115, 354 for accounts of Wright’s lectures. Addison Gayle, *Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980), 299 gives an account of Hughes meeting Wright just before the latter’s death.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 351.

RICHARD WRIGHT'S "SPANISH JOB": THE MEANING OF
"PAGANISM"¹⁶

Wright left France for Spain on 15 August 1954. He had just returned from a trip to the Gold Coast of Africa, where he had had a number of disturbing encounters with what he regarded as tribalism and paganism. Indeed, Michel Fabre, Wright's biographer, characterizes the trips to Africa and Spain as linked by a preoccupation with irrationality. Noting Wright's "own faith in rationality" Fabre contends that: "For the first time in Africa, Wright was really afraid, afraid of the pagan religion with its incomprehensible and bloody practices."¹⁷ Fabre suggests that Wright invested a great deal of time and research in his Spanish trip; that Wright was attracted to that country because he was interested in nations in transition; and that he began with quite a specific hypothesis. That hypothesis, which developed from his African experiences, dealt with the underlying "primitivism" and paganism of Spain. As Wright travelled to Spain in 1954 and 1955, and as he worked on his manuscript from February 1956 onwards, a sense of the pagan acted as the guiding logic of his study.

Wright first wrote about that country during the Civil War. In 1937 he published six articles for the New York *Daily Worker* about Spain's conflict. In these essays Wright shared Hughes's desire to draw attention to black Americans in the conflict, noting their service in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.¹⁸ Wright was also keen to draw correspondences between the position of African-Americans and the Spanish Loyalists, thereby creating a cross-cultural comparison which anticipated *Pagan Spain's* methodology. In fact, one might think of Wright's career in terms of a steady movement towards cultural anthropology: questions of cultural otherness and mediations between different societies came decisively to the fore during his work in the 1950s. Wright was working throughout this time as a literary anthropologist, translator and cultural mediator (in spite of his lack of detailed knowledge – cultural or linguistic – of these foreign terrains). In 1959–60, for instance, Wright worked on and then attempted to publish *This Other World: Projections in the Haiku*

¹⁶ Wright wrote to Paul Reynolds on 9 Oct. 1954: "So far as I am concerned, *Black Power* is in the past and I'm setting my eyes and mind on the Spanish job," Fabre, 406.

¹⁷ Fabre, 398–99. The information about the composition of *Pagan Spain* draws on Fabre's detailed account of Wright in Spain, 407–25.

¹⁸ Richard Wright, "Walter Garland Tells What Spain's Fight against Fascism Means to the Negro People." *Daily Worker*, 29 Nov. 1937, 2.

Manner. He completed some 4,000 haiku, although the project was to remain unpublished (the manuscript is in the Beinecke library). Floyd Ogburn has written about these poems as an important source: they mark a departure from Wright’s established poetic. But one might also see these poems as establishing a continuum with the Wright who earlier in the decade travelled to the Gold Coast and then Spain. The journey towards a radically different poetic maps out a journey into the other, on the page, just as Wright’s literal voyages took him away from the Western order of things. The title of the Haiku project is telling. *This Other World*: in a series of journeys, both actual and written, Wright was seeking out “these other worlds.”¹⁹

The working MS title, *Pagan Spain: A Report of a Journey into the Past*, hints at an ironic take on the “other world” of Spain. *A Report*: Wright mimics a pseudo-scientific colonial discourse. He writes as if from a position of advancement, looking at a foreign culture as if it were a lingering hangover from an earlier stage of development. Recently returned from Africa, Wright transposed a white discourse of African exploration into a European setting. He, the black explorer, will now create a “Report” on the antediluvian and historically marooned culture of Spain. Such ironic reversals are typical of *Pagan Spain*’s articulation of a “reverse ethnography”; it creates a looking-glass anthropology where the progressive black American explores the customs of a foreign, ancient, *European* civilization.²⁰

For example, at the start of *Pagan Spain* many of Wright’s encounters turn on the stereotypical image the Spanish have of him as a heathen, as the primitive once subdued by the *Conquistadores*. In one of his first meetings Wright is taken to Barcelona cathedral where, he is told, “the first Indians that Columbus brought from America were baptized” (*PS*, 16). He is, as black American, repositioned as one of the indigenous central Americans converted by Columbus. The differences between African-American and Native American are elided; both are strange, are non-European. Wright becomes a type of generic primitive and the object of the Spaniards’ solicitous but patronizing ministrations. In a later exchange, a visit to a Spanish village sees Wright becoming quite literally the *object* of scrutiny. While the peasants stare at him, he is “an object that

¹⁹ Floyd Ogburn, Jr., “Richard Wright’s Unpublished Haiku: A World Elsewhere,” *MELUS*, 23 (1998), 57–81.

²⁰ Wright’s *ironic* and *refracted* meditations on colour have led some commentators to overlook the racial topics in *Pagan Spain*. John A. Williams even comments that, “Race was not his consideration in this book.” *The Most Native of Sons* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 109.

was neither human nor animal” (*PS*, 131–32). Above all, Wright is imagined by the Spanish as a “heathen”:

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 only truth in existence and they were offering it to me. (16–17)

The key phrase here is “the only truth in existence.” *Pagan Spain* is a text where the object of anthropological study usurps the position of the ethnographer. Wright is often constructed by the gaze of the wondering Spanish; but, equally, he himself decodes and interprets the Spanish. Wright presents himself as an enlightenment traveller, a quizzical and ironic figure imbued with relativism and a sense of enquiry. What marks out the Spanish as pre-modern and pagan is their belief that they possess “the only truth in existence.” Wright and his reader are positioned as more knowing, more sophisticated; in their ideological naivety the Spanish become modern equivalents to the Native Americans who first confronted Columbus. In this sense, *Pagan Spain* can be read quite literally as a meditation on Stein’s phrase, “Spain is primitive, but lovely.” For Stein, Spain’s primitivism denotes a familiar notion of romantic “backwardness.” Such an image of picturesque ruin or failure had, of course, surfaced in American writing in Washington Irving’s *The Alhambra* (1832); but Wright was perhaps the first writer to attempt a detailed ideological analysis of what such backwardness meant. Thus, “Paganism” is cognate with backwardness; but it also has a politicised inflection, denoting a religious order hostile to progress, modern liberalism and rationality. Wright used “pagan” ironically: the term has no sense of pagan pleasure or sensuality, signifying instead a dark irrationality.

For Wright, Spain resonated in what we would now call a postcolonial manner. Exploring Spain in the midst of journeys to Africa and Indonesia, Wright found an ironic lesson for the European colonizers. The original imperial power, Spain, had become a bizarrely antediluvian society, locked in a medieval ideology. At the heart of this ethos Wright locates political backwardness, the backwardness of pre-modern paganism. The overall argumentative pattern of the text is structured by an ironic reversal that locates within Spain’s superficial *civilization* a deep-rooted paganism resistant to modernity. The Spanish thought they had brought civilization

to the heathen peoples of the Americas; in Wright’s diagnosis, Columbus transported a fervently elemental Christianity from which the Spanish have barely progressed. “Spain” therefore signifies a curious and dangerous fusion of pagan religiosity and repressive totalitarianism. The country has conspicuously fallen out of the broad currents of historical progress. At one point Wright imagines this historical backwardness encoded in the very landscape. Amidst the empty hills he sees the occasional industrial chimney, marking out the feebleness of Iberian progress:

There were no signs whatever of industrial or farm life and when, later, I did see a rare stack-pipe, black or red, lost and lonely in the scaly hills, it resembled an exclamation point, emphasising how far Spain had fallen to the rear of her sister European nations. (*PS*, 117)

Underpinning such commentary is a straightforward progressive agenda. Wright “reads off” the landscape of Spain as if it were literally encoded with signs of progress; landscape becomes text, a script where the traveller notes marks of economic or political advance. At such points Wright comes curiously close to the semiotics of “progress” seen in Irving’s work: landscape is decoded for signatures of advancement and decline.

If Wright occasionally forces or overplays his thesis in *Pagan Spain*, then we must acknowledge that he had powerful political reasons to do so. For the final lesson of *Pagan Spain* is a postcolonial insight: that a modern European nation can also be thought of as if it were a “dark continent,” saturated with superstition, irrationality, oppression and totalitarianism. And in his final paragraphs Wright explicitly rooted this “irrational paganism” in the original imperial impulse of 1492:

In 1492, in the name of God, the Son and the Holy Ghost, the Catholic king and queen, Ferdinand and Isabel, had driven the Moors from Spain, had liquidated the Jews, and had scattered a handful of wilful Gypsies (who were supposed to have forged the nails that went into the cross of Christ!) to the winds. The Inquisition, that cold and calculating instrument of God’s terror, had whipped the Spaniards into a semblance of outward conformity, yet keeping intact all the muddy residue of an irrational paganism that lurked at the bottom of the Spanish heart, and Spain had been ready with one Will, one Race, one God, and one Aim ...

And Spain, despite all the heroic sacrifices of her liberals, of her poets, of her lovers of liberty, had remained stuck right at that point. (*PS*, 191)

THE COMPOSITION OF *PAGAN SPAIN*: “COMBINATION”

As a work of travel literature and political reportage, *Pagan Spain* furthered Wright’s fascination with factual and documentary discourses, and with a writing partly derived from sociology. Earlier works, such as *12,000,000 Black Voices* (1941) had quite deliberately invoked discourses from academic research; the subtitle of that book, *A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*, pitched for scholarly weight. The use of photographs (Wright was co-credited along with “photo-direction by Edwin Roskam”) further demonstrated an affinity with the photo-documentary realism of works such as Walker Evans and James Agee’s 1941 text, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.²¹ Wright also provided the “Introduction” to *Black Metropolis* (1946), a study by Horace R. Cayton and St. Clair Duke of black Chicago. *Black Metropolis* was a sociological but also a polemic work, a monumental analysis of an African-American urban community that positioned alongside statistics and demographics a series of more speculative essays in political theory. Wright introduced the book with praise for the “honest science” of Chicago, by which he meant the sociological research of luminaries such as the University’s Robert E. Park.²² He demonstrated his fascination with sociological methodology, and his awareness of the varied academic discourses which Cayton and Drake had deployed. In a telling comment Wright noted that, “The dominant hallmark of the book is the combination throughout of the disciplines of both sociology and anthropology.”²³

For “Combination” is the key to *Pagan Spain*. The text straddles a number of stylistic registers as it dips into and out of a variety of generic conventions. At several points Wright deploys political and religious history, sociology and anthropology; he also amalgamates topical, political commentary with personal memoir. *Pagan Spain* might be read as a typical example of the discursive polymorphousness seen by Michael Kowalewski as typical of travel writing. Kowalewski points to the “dauntingly heterogeneous character” of this form; it “borrows freely from the memoir, journalism, letters, guidebooks, confessional narrative, and, most important, fiction.”²⁴ These various registers can be found in

²¹ Richard Wright (with “photo-direction by Edwin Roskam”), *12,000,000 Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (1941; New York: Arno Press, 1969).

²² Richard Wright, Introduction to Horace R. Cayton and St. Clair Duke, *Black Metropolis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1946), xvii–xxxiv; at xvii. ²³ *Ibid.*, xx.

²⁴ Michael Kowalewski, “Introduction” to Kowalewski, ed., *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 7.

Wright’s book, but its two dominant modes are a form of analytic essay (derived from political science or sociology) and a wryly ironic first-person narrative.

When Wright began to work on the “Spanish job” he extended his knowledge of that country by looking into Spanish history; he researched at the United Nations library in Geneva, reading “up-to-date information on the development of Spain’s economy.”²⁵ This combination of historical reading with social–economic analysis provides a template for *Pagan Spain*. One way to read this text would be as a sociological report or an anthropological investigation. Wright was certainly aware of the codes and methods of such academic writing. On his journey to Geneva he was accompanied by his old friend, the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal; Wright also dedicated *Pagan Spain* to Myrdal and his wife. The epigraph reads: “For my friends ALVA and GUNNAR MYRDAL who suggested this book and whose compassionate hearts have long brooded upon the degradation of human life in Spain” (no page number given). Myrdal visited Wright in Paris in the 1940s, and he supplied the Introduction to *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference*, a work published before *Pagan Spain* in 1956.²⁶ The Swede was the acclaimed author of a major study of African Americans, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944). Wright greatly admired this book, and reviewers also coupled it with *Black Boy*, seeing the two works as comparable denunciations of social injustice.²⁷

The analytical, essayistic, academic registers of *Pagan Spain* are clearly indebted to Wright’s grounding in the social sciences, especially anthropology and sociology. At the centre of the book’s argument is a commentary that would not be out of place in a work of political science. Wright positions throughout his study a series of extended quotations from a Falangist study entitled *Formación Política: Lecciones para las Lechas*. Wright uses this text to mesh the history of Columbus’s explorations with the contemporary story of Spanish Fascism. The text is in the form of a Socratic dialogue of questions and answers (the answers are naturally far

²⁵ Fabre, 411.

²⁶ Gayle, 206 discusses Wright’s Paris salon. Myrdal wrote the Introduction to *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1956).

²⁷ Walter A. Jackson discusses Wright’s reaction to *An American Dilemma* in *Gunnar Myrdal and America’s Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938–1987* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 246–47. He notes that reviews of *Black Boy* saw it as “a companion piece to *An American Dilemma*” (247).

more dogmatic and authoritarian than implied by this progressive format). One question asks, “Since when have we known that Spain has a destiny to fulfil?,” to which the answer given is: “Since the most remote ages of its history.” The litany of imperial examples then adduced includes the conquest of the Americas, the moment “When the sovereigns, Isabel and Ferdinand, began, through the Universities and the Spanish missionaries they sent there, to civilize the whole of America” (*PS*, 30). The *Formación Política* has two functions within *Pagan Spain*: first, it acts as a skein that links together the disparate sections of the text; second, it provides a revelation of the Spanish ideology in that ideology’s own words. It is self-revelation, an exposure of pagan Spain by means of its own discourse (though, of course, it is Wright himself who is ultimately in control, as editor of this material). Wright rather grandiloquently deploys *Formación Política* as a representative text for the West *in its totality*: “I was staring at the mouth, at the veritable fount of Western history” (*PS*, 30). This is Wright’s rewriting of his mentor Stein’s comment that Spain is where one can find what the Western world is made of. Wright recasts Stein to imagine this “Westness” in explicitly ideological terms: Spain as avatar of imperialism.

Wright searches for a central, defining ideological characteristic of the country: the *Formación Política* is one way in which that ideology or creed reveals itself. Wright steadily defines the clutch of characteristics that mark the Spanish ideology: pagan religiosity, anti-modernism, authoritarianism, intermittent racism, secrecy. Here, we see the importance of Wright’s knowledge of social and political science, particularly the work of those academics I have already mentioned: Gunnar Myrdal, Horace Cayton, St. Clair Drake. Both *Black Metropolis* and *An American Dilemma* had been constructed around the identification of a central, common American ideology; the broad gist of both works was that African-Americans shared that belief system, and that more should be done to incorporate them into society. Gunnar Myrdal had explicitly identified an American “creed” at the very start of *An American Dilemma*: “Americans of all national origins, classes, regions, creeds, and colors, have something in common: a social *ethos*, a political creed.”²⁸ In writing about Spain, Wright transposed the logic of *An American Dilemma*, seeking out the “social *ethos*” which the Spanish held in common.

The fundamental formalistic pattern of *Pagan Spain* is to move between these generalized and theoretical analyses, on the one hand, and highly

²⁸ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944; New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 3.

specific, localized illustrations of Spanish life, on the other. Wright attempts, not always successfully, to yoke together the generalizing rhetoric of a social-scientific study with a travel journal’s reliance on the telling vignette or cameo. The random and varied encounters that Wright records are thus bracketed by a cultural anthropology describing the underlying formalism of this society. So, when Wright confirms the correspondence between Spanish Protestants and African-Americans, the reader recognizes a carefully precise, “scientific” discourse: “I shall describe some of the facets of the psychological problems and the emotional sufferings of a group of *white Negroes* whom I met in Spain” (*PS*, 137 – Wright’s italics). Behind such sentences one senses Wright’s reading of sociologists such as Myrdal and Cayton. At the same time, *Pagan Spain* undoubtedly positions its neo-scientific reasoning alongside a more familiar humanism. Note in the above sentences Wright’s emphasis on the “psychological problems” and “emotional sufferings” of the Protestants: even as he is drawn towards the scientific language of the sociologists, Wright remains the humanist, the writer concerned with the specific delineation of individual suffering.

“I WAS BORN A PROTESTANT”: RELIGIOUS DISSENT AND POLITICS IN *PAGAN SPAIN*

A further unsettling lesson takes its cue from Spain’s hostility towards its tiny minority of Protestants. Wright here follows Myrdal’s reasoning in *An American Dilemma* by focusing on the plight of minorities. The “only truth” trumpeted by the Spanish was a pre-Enlightenment Catholicism: political opposition, in this authoritarian state, is located within religious heterodoxy. The title of one section, “The Underground Christ,” could hardly be more explicit. Wright’s account of the secret dissemination of Protestant religious practice plays on some rather stereotypical fears of Catholicism as an inquisitorial religion, even though he stresses that he is now distanced from his original faith:

I was born a Protestant. I lived a Protestant childhood. But I feel more or less towards that religion as Protestants in Spain feel towards Catholicism. What I felt most keenly in Spain was the needless, unnatural, and utterly barbarous nature of the psychological suffering that the Spanish Protestant was doomed to undergo at the hands of the Church and State officials and his Catholic neighbours. For that exquisite suffering and emotional torture, I have a spontaneous and profound sympathy. (*PS*, 136)

In biographical terms Wright returns to the fierce anti-Christian

sentiment found in early works such as *Black Boy* and *Native Son*; but he now finds political worth in his native Protestantism. What is significant is the focus on repression as the central dynamic in the lives of Spanish Protestants. I think that the various contexts of *Pagan Spain* here become important. Written after a trip to Africa, *Pagan Spain* was a work of engaged internationalism, a travel journal framing a political critique. But, even as he writes about Spain, Wright obliquely turns back to America. His emphasis on individual liberty and freedom of expression, coupled with acute sensitivity to the policing of Spanish society, create a distinctively *African-American* account of Franco's regime. While the book bears the contextual impress of the Cold War and the ideological struggles between Communism and Fascism (notably in the fascination with totalitarianism), it is also marked by a black Southerner's alertness to daily oppression. Hence Wright's emphasis on harassment and the psychology of Protestant suffering. Just as in his earlier, Civil War writings he drew parallels between the Spanish Loyalists and African-Americans, so Wright cannot help but see analogies between the Protestants in Spain and the "American Negro":

I am an American Negro with a background of psychological suffering stemming from my previous position as a member of a persecuted racial minority. What drew my attention to the emotional plight of the Protestants in Spain were the undeniable and uncanny affinities that they held in common with American Negroes, Jews, and other oppressed minorities. It is another proof, if any is needed today, that the main and decisive aspects of human reactions are conditioned and are not inborn. (*PS*, 137)

Crucially, the affinity here is between the "American Negro" and the "Protestants in Spain," not between Protestants of two nationalities. Wright works in such passages as a kind of polemical structuralist, an analyst of different societies concerned to map an underlying cartography of suffering. At such points the impress of his reading in sociology and political theory can be felt. Note the lesson that Wright draws from the communality of suffering in the US and Spain. "It is another proof, if any is needed today, that the main and decisive aspects of human reactions are conditioned and are not inborn." The final lesson, in other words, is not merely that "oppressed minorities" throughout the world share a "background of psychological suffering"; it is that social conditioning underpins such pain. "Human reactions are conditioned."

Let us return to the moment when Wright first encounters the Spanish: "I was a heathen . . . I was not only a stranger, but a 'lost' one in dire need of being saved" (*PS*, 16–17). What interests me here is the simultaneous

recognition and obscuring of racial difference. The Spanish immediately mark his otherness; but by a process of transference this racial difference becomes that of the indigenous Americans. Why is Wright not recognized for what he is – the descendant of Africans? Framing this encounter, in fact, is a much larger displacement in the text: the exploration of various kinds of racial “Others” (the Moor, the Native American) in place of a recognition that Africans played a part in the construction of the Spanish empire. Where, in short, is the discussion of slavery in *Pagan Spain*?

If an African-American writer approached this topic today, it is hard to see how the subject of slavery could be overlooked. In place of Wright’s lacuna (the absence of slavery), we now have historiographic plenitude, as commentators position imperial Spain within comparative studies of slave-owning empires. Robin Blackburn has recently argued that Spanish slavery was *exemplary* for the other European powers. For, “together with the Portuguese example, it was to serve as a sort of model for other colonists and colonial powers – just as the term ‘Negro’ was adopted into English, with a heavy implication of enslavement.” Even if they were to adopt other socio-economic models, Blackburn adds, the colonists of North America “were very much aware of the Spanish practice of African slavery.”²⁹ Blackburn’s magisterial study suggests one reply to Stein’s assertion that in Spain Wright would find “what the Western world is made of”: the West is here “made of” slaves, a practice established by colonists from the Iberian peninsula.

For Wright, it was possible to disengage discussion of slavery and empire in ways that would not be possible today. As a writer concerned with liberation struggles he was fascinated by imperialism and its decomposition, but his analysis of empire did not lead to engagement with the hard facts of slavery. He wrote as an internationalist for whom anti-colonial and anti-imperial paradigms were paramount, even though they did not connect with an account of slavery in its American context. Wright published *Pagan Spain* in 1957, at the juncture where this intellectual framework began to give way to a rewritten history of slavery. Kenneth Stampp’s *The Peculiar Institution* (1956) and Stanley Elkins’s *Slavery* (1959) created a new historiographical space for institutional and comparative analysis (Elkins explicitly positioned North American slavery

²⁹ Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492–1800* (London: Verso, 1998), 156.

against its Latin American counterpart).³⁰ Interestingly, one might read Gunnar Myrdal's comment on *Pagan Spain* as an indirect but telling suggestion that a more searching analysis of that nation was needed – an analysis perhaps predicated on this new historical scholarship. Myrdal wrote to Wright in 1957, saying that the book was “only a preamble to the serious, penetrating and revealing analysis of the country” he “ought someday to write.”³¹ Did Myrdal imagine that this “revealing analysis” would pay more heed to slavery, that “peculiar institution”?

³⁰ Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (1956; New York: Knopf, 1972), inaugurated a new wave of historical research on the topic, and is now regarded as the foundational text in the modern historiography of slavery. Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1959; Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976) included extensive comparative accounts, including analyses of Spanish slavery (63–80).

³¹ Gunnar Myrdal to Richard Wright, 16 Apr. 1957, cited Fabre, 416. One can only speculate that Myrdal was aware of the new scholarship, especially the comparisons between forms of slavery in the Americas, and felt that such history would be valuable to a future study of “pagan Spain.”