

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Presentations, Talks, and Seminar Papers --
Department of English

English, Department of

9-19-2008

A Western Man of Color: Richard Wright and the World

Guy J. Reynolds

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, greynolds2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishtalks>



Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#)

Reynolds, Guy J., "A Western Man of Color: Richard Wright and the World" (2008). *Presentations, Talks, and Seminar Papers -- Department of English*. 5.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishtalks/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Presentations, Talks, and Seminar Papers -- Department of English by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

A Western Man of Color: Richard Wright and the World

Guy Reynolds
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Let's begin with the beginning of our world:

'Buttressed by their belief that their God had entrusted the earth into their keeping, drunk with power and possibility, waxing rich through trade in commodities, human and non-human, with awesome naval and merchant marines at their disposal, their countries filled with human debris anxious for any adventures, psychologically armed with new facts, white Western Christian civilization during the fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with a long, slow, and bloody explosion, hurled itself upon the sprawling masses of colored humanity in Asia and Africa.'¹

Richard Wright had become by the mid 50s an analyst of what it means to be 'of' the West. He was by now a firmly-established émigré, and had become a French citizen in 1947. His journeys, in a way, had only just become: Europe was a stage or an inauguration into further mappings of the self and society. Those mappings took the extraordinary geo-political shifts of the mid-century as their subject. In the wake of the Second World War, severely damaged economically and in terms of sheer power, European nations were finally forced to give ground to the nationalist movements

Paper presented at "The Wor[ld]s of Richard Wright: Native Son and Expatriate. A Centennial Remembrance of Wright & the Third Anniversary of the Native and Expatriate Sons and Daughters of Hurricane Katrina," University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska, September 19, 2008. Copyright © 2008 Guy Reynolds.

that had grown in earlier decades. The United States, the clearest winner in a changed world, was an ambivalent endorser of decolonization, which had become entwined with cold war complexities, most notably in Vietnam. As a French resident, Wright – like James Baldwin – witnessed at first hand the domestic responses to France’s decolonization-era struggle in Algeria. As an American, from the South, Wright sensed very quickly that worldwide conflicts had found echoes and contrasts in America’s civil rights struggles. In other words, through his travels, and his highly self-conscious sense of himself as a being forged by history – an agent, but one shaped as we all are by complex circumstances – Wright was within the historical process and an ironic observer of its processes. The result: a trilogy of travel books. *Black Power* (1954), *The Color Curtain* (1956), *Pagan Spain* (1957) were set within the rapidly-changing terrain of the post-war world. A further volume, *White Man Listen!* (1957), based on lectures given at the beginning of the decade, provided a theoretical and historical counterpoint to the journeys in those three books.

His 1950s works arrange his own history, analyses of African-American culture, travels through a world emerging from European dominance, and re-mappings of the history of global integration to create a sweeping reading of the West and the rest. The identification of ‘the West’ is itself arresting. Wright works backwards and forwards across the Atlantic, and in a very literal sense he followed the infamous Atlantic slaver’s triangle, moving from the States to Europe, and then in *Black Power* back to West Africa. But Wright was a tremendously prescient writer, and it was Asia that caught his eye at this time. He attended the famous Bandung conference of ‘non-aligned’ nations in Indonesia in 1955, and his vision of this new world order included a striking emphasis on Asia’s importance. Wright’s world was in the first instance a cold war world, shaped by the drawing down of the Iron Curtain and the polarizing division of countries into alignments around the West and the Eastern bloc. Yet Wright could see that there were other forms of division within the world, especially those structured around cultural difference, religious difference, and skin color. In his analysis the ‘color curtain’ replaces the ‘iron curtain’, and it is religion which

will continue to be the engine of politics on a global scale. The audacity of this argument is evident with the hindsight of fifty years.

What does the work of a literary intellectual in this new age of globalization look like? The short answer: unapologetic, ceaselessly curious and engaged, profoundly shaped by history and geography, time and space. What's important about the start of *The Color Curtain* is the sense of excitement and engagement – the sheer seizing of the moment. Or, take *White Man Listen!*. The title has a typically Wrightean directness of address. The book consists of lectures delivered in Europe: the audience, we imagine, was largely composed of white listeners. The essays range widely, over the history of African-American poetry, the history of European conquest, the current international scene, the future of the 'Third World.' In the very broadest sense – and this is where my title comes in – they combine to form an analysis of 'the West.' This is where we see the prescience of Wright's travels in the 50s, and the foresight with which he used them to forge an analysis of how the world could be seen. Wright was one of the first American intellectuals to work in an extended way with the idea, and the ideology, of the West in this new post-colonial era.

There are three main components to his analysis. First, the overriding emphasis on the significance of decolonization. Second, his sense of himself as having a unique perspective on the West by dint of emerging, quite literally, from slavery. Third, as an expatriate and a European resident, Wright now writes with an inwardness about European culture, an ethnographic knowledge grown from being in the 'field' of Europe for a long time. This is most obvious in *Pagan Spain*. While in early eras white European travelers had typically explored, as Conrad says in *Heart of Darkness*, the 'utmost ends of the earth', Wright now turns his attention to the 'darkness' within Europe itself: the repressive, anti-modern, paranoid world of Franco's Spain. In Wright's analysis, that 'darkness' (hence 'pagan Spain'), that reaction against the modern world or progress or development, was linked in Spain to the resurgence of a fundamentalist Catholicism. In a further move, Wright then linked the discovery of the New World in 1492 to Spain's expulsion of the Jews and the *reconquista* that had cleared the Iberian penin-

sula of Islam. The bringing of Christian light to the natives, in other words, was in Wright's eyes explicitly linked at its base to religious exclusivism.

Two points: Wright took a very very long view of how the world might be read. In writing about the 1950s, he reaches right back to the medieval era. He imagines history in terms of long, epochal transformations, and for him the entry of Europeans into the non-Western world was the turning-point in global history. As a historical thinker, Wright shares some of the positions adopted by the French *Annales* historians who were living and working in Paris at that time. Like Fernand Braudel, Wright was fascinated by geography, demography, and religion as the shaping forces in the history of civilizations. Thinking in terms of how civilizations meet and encounter one another, and how, to coin a phrase, they sometimes clash, Wright accepted a world inevitably shaped by the European legacy, a legacy bound up with slavery and religion. In Wright's ironic recasting of New World history it is not the story of white uplift that is significant – the escape of pilgrims from tyranny, the discovery of 'freedom' – but a knotted and complex narrative that begins in the fifteenth-century, and is bound up with Europe's conflicted relationships with Africa and Asia. Wright himself becomes the ironic legacy of those journeys, a figure produced by the West but critical of its ways: the African-American.

The movement out of America brought yet another finding for this world traveler, Wright. If this was a world of color, then it was a world of teeming religious belief and difference. Repeatedly and insistently, Wright drew attention to the persistence of religious belief – Animist, Islamic, Shintoist, or Roman Catholic – in the countries where he was now working. The world uncovered by the retreat of Europe from the colonies was a world where religious identity remained the primary means of identification, for the self and society. Wright was fascinated and sometimes horrified by the enduring significance of religion. 'Today, as the tide of white domination of the land mass of Asia and Africa recedes, there lies exposed to view a procession of shattered cultures, disintegrated societies, and a writhing sweep of more aggressive, irrational religion than the world has known for centuries.'²

A child of the Enlightenment as he saw himself, Wright noted in the 50s that religion had become a form of resistance to the West. In Indonesia, for instance, he ironically praised a young Moslem for not being 'tampered' with by missionaries. Wright had an anthropologist's receptivity to the belief structures of other societies. He was unsettled by such structures, but he never let go of their significance. While he had moved away from his own faith legacy, he understood how these others might not make such a movement, might embed themselves further in inherited cultures at a time of radical change. 'Religion became a matter of human pride.'³

He was skeptical, that is, about whether the world was becoming secularized. This was a tremendous insight. Much American writing by policy specialists in the 50s and 60s expressed a deep belief in the secularization of 'traditional societies.' 'Development theory,' so-called, tended to see cultures moving up the developmental ladder and at the same time shedding their inherited belief structures. Societies would become 'modern' and less 'traditional' in their beliefs. This thinking flows through the works of many public intellectuals, for instance the writing of Lyndon Johnson's advisor, Walt Rostow, or the work of development specialists such as Daniel Lerner, whose 1958 book on the Middle East, *The Passing of Traditional Society*, says a good deal about this mind-set. These U.S. commentators, while emerging from their own highly religious society, nearly always underestimated the role of other religions, particularly non-Christian faiths, in the countries they increasingly commented upon.

Wright never made this mistake. He was repeatedly shocked by the apparent permanence of such belief systems. And here comes the great turn in Wright's argument about the West and the rest. While he was ever-alert to the West's racism, and to the history of empire and colony, he felt that the West did represent a radical form of modernity. The entry of the West into traditional places in Asia or Africa was catastrophic and destabilizing, but in a way necessary. This is the shock of the new – and Wright finally aligns himself on the side of newness. As an African-American, an expatriate, a displaced intellectual, he himself embodies such newness. For Wright, presenting himself as a clear-eyed observer of historical change, the

West's impact on 'tradition' was welcome, since it helped to 'smash the irrational ties of religion and custom and tradition in Asia and Africa.'⁴ Read in isolation, such comments (and other admissions, such as 'I have been made into a Westerner'⁵) might seem an abnegation of Wright's post-colonial credentials. But this is where *Pagan Spain* enters and alters the domain of Wright's work. For *Pagan Spain* created a reading of the West marked by what he called his 'chronically skeptical ... irredeemably critical, outlook.'⁶ For Wright, the West had awakened the globe into modernity, but the West itself was now becoming sleepy with anti-modernism. The very anti-modernism of Spain was, using this logic, yet more proof of the progressive power of Asia and Africa: the torch of development was moving from Europe to the formerly colonized nations.

For Wright, the 'one world' (and he used the phrase in his work) meant that each corner of the globe would shed light on another. The irrationalism of Europe ironically illuminated the capacity for progressive, rational development in Asia and Africa. At one point in his lecture 'Tradition and Industrialization' Wright asked himself, 'Am I ahead of or behind the West?' and answered himself: 'My personal judgment is that I'm ahead.'⁷ Reading across and between *Black Power*, *The Color Curtain* and now *Pagan Spain* one can see that he was, as he claimed, 'ahead.'

There is a line connecting Wright, then, and recent commentators such as Samuel Huntington, with his 'clash of civilizations' thesis that has achieved such wide circulation in the last few years. Wright, though, seems to me a subtler thinker than many of the architects of the clash. First, because he sees civilizations themselves as made up a certain self-division and layered complexity. An advanced or 'modern' civilization such as that of Spain might in Wright's analysis be primitive. So the West might not represent a uniform or consistent set of values, nor might all 'values' be valuable. This leads to a marked sense of relativism in Wright's work, a sense that the West needs to be extremely careful in imagining that other cultures might want to be like Europe or the United States. Wright is explicit about this argument. 'I dread that there will be an attempt at burning up millions of people to make the world safe for the "white man's" conception of existence, to make

the ideas of Mill and Hume and Locke good for all people, at all times, everywhere.⁸

What this means, in effect, is that Wright was skeptical about the worldwide spread of Western values. He certainly did not think, as later U.S. commentators would claim, that the world had come to the 'end of history' with the triumph of Western-style liberal democracy. The entry of the West into the rest of the world, the awakening moment of decolonization, the deep legacy of colonialism in terms of how countries were constructed: in Wright's analysis this will leave enough 'history' to occupy the world for many a year. Wright gets close to suggesting that history has only really begun, in a world of over 2 billion people (*Color Curtain* begins with this simple point) – he was writing in the early 50s, and the world population is now nearly 7 billion, so if anything this Wrightean analysis is even truer today.

It is evident from the 1957 collection of lectures that made up *White Man, Listen!*, that Wright had worked his way towards a synoptic paradigm to read and then evaluate different countries. Declaring himself a 'Western man of color' he acknowledges the West's agency, while deploring its defensiveness and racism.⁹ Wright's sense of historical transition is on full display, as is his sense of historical irony – the broad thesis is that having brought into being the Westernized elite of Africa and Asia, the West will now face an alternate form of modernity and hence a political-cultural resistance to its own hegemony.

Why did Wright self-identify as a 'Western man of color'? The answer is rooted in his sense of progress and modernity, his commitment to self-questioning and a self-critical way of being. This is what Wright takes the West to be, at its best. Hence, the failure of Franco's Spain lies in its turning away from science and rationalism towards forms of superstition. And the problem with West Africa – and this is why many Afro-centric critics have found Wright troubling – lies in the persistence of tribalism. It is modernity, progress, rationalism, science and reasoning that captivate Wright. The West, he suggests, has been one of the prime avatars of those values, but they might now be transplanted elsewhere, and the West itself is perfectly capable of becoming un-Western. The African-American and

expatriate author now emerges, in this thread of reasoning, as an embodiment of the modern. Self-conscious, historically-positioned, able to move within what we might call the 'old' Atlantic world (Western Europe and the United States), the 'new' Africa of decolonization, and the Asia glimpsed at Bandung, Wright could see himself as a harbinger of a world to come.

What would Wright make of our contemporary world? It's always irritating to meet people who say with absolute justification, 'I told you so,' but it's hard not to see Wright becoming one of those individuals. He was right about the world's interconnectedness, about the decisive impact of colonialism and decolonization, about the enduring significance of religion as an ideological-cultural force, about a globe of intimacy and estrangement. He would have been fascinated, I think, by the world's current volatility and complexity. As a materialist thinker, with an acute understanding of money, he would have found recent events – what one commentator has called 'the end of American capitalism' – compelling. One might say that Wright's trajectory was to remain a 'native son', but ultimately to remake the meaning of 'native' to mean 'native' to this, our 'One World.'



Notes

- 1 Richard Wright, 'The Psychological Reactions of Oppressed People, in *White Man Listen!* (1957), now collected in *Black Power: Three Books From Exile: Black Power; The Color Curtain; and White Man Listen!* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 651.
- 2 'Psychological Reactions,' 655.
- 3 'Psychological Reactions,' 677.
- 4 'Tradition and Industrialization: The Historic Meaning of the Plight of the Tradig Elite in Asia and Africa,' in *White Man Listen!*, 718.
- 5 'Tradition and Industrialization,' 707.
- 6 'Tradition and Industrialization,' 705.
- 7 'Tradition and Industrialization,' 712.
- 8 'Psychological Reactions,' 698.
- 9 'Tradition and Industrialization,' 701.