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Towards a Cosmopolitan Community: Richard Wright’s *Black Power*

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Abstract
This paper proposes an investigation into the identity of ethnic minorities on the background of the majority. More specifically, the paper aims at analysing a search for, and (self-) representation of, African-American identity against the African and American backgrounds, as illustrated by Richard Wright’s travelogue Black Power (1954). In offering a close reading of Wright’s African travelogue and highlighting its rhetoric of distance, the paper finds that it is by means of travel that Wright eventually attains a sense of belonging to a community, though not a geographic or ethnic one. This sense of belonging is enabled by Wright’s identification with what he describes as the “tragic elite” of the Third World, a (dis)community of ideological exiles made available to him through travel and which becomes the mirror image of his own identity as formed and expressed in Black Power and subsequent works.

Keywords: Richard Wright, Black Power, African-American, Africa, travel, tragic elite.

1. Introduction
In-between the extreme approaches to life and writing in Native Son (1940) and White Man, Listen! (1957), Richard Wright’s career registers in the 1950s what has been considered a detour, but could be an existential turning point. Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos (1954), The Color Curtain (1956), and Pagan Spain (1957) progressively illustrate the emergence of a solution to the writer’s physical and mental uprootedness. As this paper will show, the triggering moment may have been represented by Wright’s journey to Africa. In 1953, Richard Wright travelled to the Gold Coast of Africa and observed for six months the life and customs of the country nearing independence from colonial rule; the resulting travelogue, Black Power (1954), marks a new cosmopolitan phase in Wright’s career, whose final decade was dedicated to travel (and) writing about Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Intent on comprehending the starting point of African-American genesis, the Middle Passage, Black Power begins with a digressive historical report on the slave trade. The initiating narrative lingers on Wright’s ironic reflections regarding Liverpool as the slaves’ point of destination and his own point of departure. Because Liverpool was a focal point in the slave trade, Wright’s journey constitutes an occasion of questioning the respectability of the slave-based Western society, of remembering how the African-American was deemed a commodity, and of reconsidering the ontic nature of the black person. As a result, the entire narrative and the journey are structured by the ramifications of the slave trade; hence primordial Africa bears no interest to Wright, for whom African history seems to begin with the Middle Passage. As the ship sales forth, Wright compares his journey to that of former slaves, presenting it as a conscious reversal of the moment of severance, only that this time there are “no handcuffs, chains, fetter, whips” (Black Power 19).

In Richard Wright and Racial Discourse, Yoshinobu Hakutani claims, quite surprisingly, that Wright’s portrayal of Africa is a balanced one, in which the writer seeks the commonalities of African and Western culture (Hakutani 169). Wright may be seeking for commonalities, but it is differences that he finds. His discourse on the African continent is not naive, innocent or phrased as a matter of personal opinion; quite the contrary, it is well documented and informed by the discourse of literature. When Wright takes the train to Liverpool and looks out at the British landscape, he sees it,
as N. Chiwengo observed, through the literature of D. H. Lawrence, Arnold Bennnett, George Moore, identifying tableaux rather than real pictures. The African landscape, too, seems to be constructed through a reading of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Wright’s recurrent description of the African sunset as a “majestic display of color that possessed an unearthly and imperious nobility” (*Black Power* 26) paints an abstract, bookish picture of the unknown and, in the same register of the dangerous unknown, the ship itself slices “its way through a sea… that stretched limitless… toward the murk horizon” (*Black Power* 27), while the ocean poses a “quiet but persistent threat of terror lurking just beneath the surface” (*Black Power* 26) so one would not have been surprised “if a vast tidal wave had thrust the ship skyward in a sudden titanic upheaval of destruction” (*Black Power* 26). The writer himself compares his hotel to such establishments as described in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Thus, from the beginning, Wright moulds African signs into familiar literary constructs to grant them meaning; that, however, does not save him from often declaring the incomprehensibility of both the African people, and their way of life.

That may be because, when he cannot fall back on documented, written knowledge, Wright feels the limitation of his understanding and projects such failure on the object of enquiry. When, in fact, he gazes upon Africa like in a mirror where he reads his own, Western-fashioned image. Though Wright is explicitly aware that the image of Africa is a projection of Western repressed desire, his gaze places Africa and Europe from the very beginning in the dichotomy of nature versus culture and his perception and subsequent critique of Africa is phrased, as scholars have observed, within Western ethnographic categories (Chiwengo 24). By gazing at the ‘primitives’ from a Western distance, Wright becomes “the subject position… setting the frame for the meaning of the encounter with the other” (Pile and Thrift 41). Thus he fails his declared intention to reveal the African’s view of the west, as he gazes on the African other, through Western eyes and remains throughout the travelogue a stranger in Africa.

2. Misencounters

In Wright’s narrative, much is carefully said and tailored to serve a Westcentric perspective on Africa. Nevertheless, what is not said bears just as much importance, for Wright’s African travelogue affords as many significant instances of repression and silencing. The exotic landscape of his travel is far from inviting; rather, it appears as impenetrable since it refuses to open up to the Western visitor. The air is “wet, sticky, yeasty” and clouds are “sagging” (*Black Power* 261). Subject to an Westcentric ideological structure, Wright is not willing to project a self distinct from technology, progress, individualism, democracy, and literacy, all of which seen foreign to the Gold Coast. His refusal of allegiance to a black paradigm, which could serve as a point of identification, is illustrated by an anticipatory encounter with an updated Uncle Tom archetype, Justice Thomas of the Nigerian Supreme Court. The very civilized Justice Thomas assures Wright that his connection to Europe has set him apart from “those cannibal natives running naked in the bush” (*Black Power* 21) and, as a result, is harshly diagnosed by Wright as suffering from the “Frantz Fanonian alienation (dis)ease” (*Black Power* 21) because of the judge’s desire to identify with British standards. The scene is ironic and show little self-awareness since, while he rejects any identification with the judge, Wright himself could be easily considered a Justice Thomas in his attitude to Africa.

Soon after his arrival in the Gold Coast, Wright drives into James Town with Kwame Nkrumah, the country’s Prime-Minister. There he witnesses from the car a group of women dancing to Nkrumah’s welcome in a manner that appears familiar to him: “I was astonished to see women, stripped to the waist, their elongated breasts flopping wildly, do a sort of weaving, circular motion with their bodies, a kind of queer shuffling dance which expressed their joy in a quiet, physical manner” (*Black Power* 56). It does not take Wright long to identify his déjà-vu: “And then I remembered: I’d seen these same snakelike, veering dances before. Where? Oh, God, yes; in America, In store-front churches, in Holy Roller Tabernacles, in God’s Temples, … And here I was seeing it all again against a background of a surging nationalist political movement!” (*Black Power* 56). In spite of the possibility of anamnesis offered by the scene, Wright does not seem to understand its meaning, and his
subsequent reactions build on the misunderstanding or, better said, repression of the two realizations potentially made available in this early episode: the presence of the sacred in every day African life and its survival through ritual on American grounds. This sudden, repressed echo is a cause of bewilderment, as Wright confesses: “when I’d come to Africa, I didn’t know what I’d find, what I’d see; the only prepossession I’d had was that I’d doubted that I’d be able to walk into the African’s cultural house and feel at home and know my way around” (*Black Power* 57). This prepossession confirms itself throughout the narrative and makes it impossible for Wright to read the meaning of the African/American dance and, by extension, of his ties to Africa; moreover, it extends Wright’s self-questioning to an even more troubling lack of identification with his original, African-American community: “This African dance today was as astonishing and dumbfounding to me as it had been when I’d seen it in America” (*Black Power* 57). In his *a priori* dismissal of a racial and/or religious interpretation, Wright refuses from the start two possible paths that could lead to an understanding of Africa as origin.

This and other such episodes show that the sign of Africa may be for Wright the potent territory scholars have claimed (Shankar 128), yet it proves to be a barren land because the travel writer refuses the interpretative instruments of race and religion that could contribute to his understanding of Africa. Wright poses early in *Black Power* the question of the meaning of his African ancestry, but he fails to confront it and plays down the issue when, in thinking about the dancers scene the next day, he regains his rationalistic poise: “That there was some kind of link between the native African and the American Negro was undoubtedly true. But what did it mean? A certain group of American anthropologists had long clamored for a recognition of what they had quaintly chosen to call ‘African’ survivals” (*Black Power* 66). This is a frequent strategy in what could be called Wright’s rhetoric of distance: falling back upon established knowledge discharges him of the obligation of personal interpretation and involvement. In assuming the detached position of the ethnographer, Wright’s initial disquiet is repressed into pseudoscientific observation.

Even if Wright is astounded by the similarities between Africans and African-Americans, he dismisses them because they cannot be rationally accounted for. However impressed Wright is that African-Americans have preserved the same “basic and fundamental patterns of behavior and response” as the Africans, he, nevertheless, distances himself from such racially-defined traits, by first eluding an explanation and then wondering if he himself possesses the respective features. In ethnographically citing the African survivals in African-American dancing and singing, Wright rejects racial essentialism on the exceptional argument that he himself cannot dance or sing. Despite the numerous proofs of the persistence of African practices in African-American lives, he maintains that he does not have the ability to understand African customs, in spite of his blackness. This shall remain “truly a big problem” without a solution throughout the text because the questions posed by his African observations come against Wright’s own frame of mind: “The bafflement evoked in me by this new reality did not spring from any desire to disclaim kinship with Africa, or from any shame of being of African descent. My problem was how to account for this ‘survival’ of Africa in America when I stoutly denied the mystic influence of ‘race’” (*Black Power* 67). That is, indeed, a difficult task. Wright’s African experiences contradict the essence of his race-free individuality, as Africa poses a challenge to Wright’s very construction of an individualistic self. He cannot but admit that African practices may survive in America, but generically attributes them to folklore and human nature. Thus, Wright’s honest failure to understand the (possibility of an) African heritage stems from his desire to be construed as a raceless that is, free, subject.

Another repressed moment of recognition takes place when, in the Old Slave Market Castle in Christianborg, Wright meets a certain Mr. Hagerson, a descendent of slaves, and, while he sees in his face the reflection of his own grandfather, he immediately dismisses that impression (*Black Power* 181). The blood or racial connection to Africa is something that Wright refuses to appeal to in exploring, or rather repressing, his link to Africa. This is an explicit attitude in the travelogue: when told that, if he were to stay longer, he would feel his race and a knowledge of it would come back to
him, Wright replies “I doubt that” and programmatically adds: “I know that I’d never feel an identification with Africans on a ‘racial’ basis” (*Black Power* 218-9).

Whereas a feeling of communion based on race is never in Wright’s views, what he interestingly replaces it with is an insight regarding culture. Wright tentatively reformulates the connection between African-Americans and Africans in terms of culture: “The question of how much African culture an African retains when transplanted to a new environment is not a racial, but a cultural problem, cutting across such tricks as measuring of skulls and intelligence tests” (*Black Power* 266). In short, posits Wright, the African remains black and becomes American, English, or French; “but, to the degree that he fails to adjust, to absorb the new environment (and this will be mainly from racial and economic reasons!), he, to that degree, and of necessity, will retain much of his primal outlook upon life, his basically poetic apprehension of existence”. (*Black Power* 266). By rephrasing what is incomprehensible to him in African life into a conclusion on the poetic African nature, Wright, although very much inspired in changing focus from racial to cultural definitions, merely rephrases the essential otherness of Africa and of its necessary survivals and posits the pre-eminence of one’s national, assumed identity. This is not a surprising resolution for the rationalist Wright; his Marxist prepossessions lead him to look for a historical solution. And, in successfully countering the seductions of the rhetoric of race through his own rhetoric of distance, Wright remains a stranger in Africa.

Another scene of dancing, also in James Town, serves to confirm to Wright this acute sense of being a stranger, to African life Wright discovers a compound in which men and women are dancing in the dark to the beat of drums and asks a young man about what is going on. When the young man observes “You’re a stranger, aren’t you?”, Wright replies “Yes; I’m an American” (*Black Power* 127). Inside the compound, Wright observes the dancers “moving slowly, undulating their abdomens, their eyes holding a faraway look” (*Black Power* 127). Upon his interrogation, he is told that a girl had just died. “I still didn’t know why they were dancing and I wanted to ask him a third time” (*Black Power* 127), Wright notes, unable as always to read through the lack of either sadness or joy in the dancers’ faces at funerals. “I had understood nothing”, reads Wright’s last comment on the episode. “I was black and they were black, but my blackness did not help me” (Wright *Black Power* 127). Blackness is to Wright a blank, useless sign. The epistemological problem that the African other poses to him results in an assertion of African incomprehensibility.

### 3. Monologic Travel

Although the title of Wright’s travelogue denotes the empowerment of blacks, it is not Africans that are empowered in the narrative, as they are bereft of voice. Because they are considered to lack intellect, they are literally portrayed as speechless. Their utterances are insignificant and, when not completely dismissed, they appear to need Wright as an interpreter. The writer is not at all interested in African voices but in static pictures which lend themselves to his interpretation. He frequently registers images, but rarely listens to the voices explaining them, choosing, in yet another strategy of distancing, to be the interpreter of a muted film. In fact, he complains that Ghanaians are reluctant to explain their customs and beliefs unless financially motivated but, when given the opportunity to have his questions answered, he falls back on the books, having failed even to listen to, not to mention understand, his interlocutors. For instance, when an educated African enquires if Wright has understood his explanations upon the writer’s questions regarding funeral rites, no reply is registered. Rather than rely on his own observations and interpretations, Wright turns to Western ethnographic literature to clarify and, in a way, authenticate what he witnesses. After briefly interviewing a servant about African beliefs in the ancestors, Wright is certain of having penetrated the African mind, although he only approached it through an approximate translation by agency of a missionary, the very imperial agent he criticizes in *Black Power*.

Moreover, the African’s Pidgin English is on principle incomprehensible to Wright because of the alleged distortion and limited nature of its vocabulary. Although he makes the scientific assumption that Pidgin English is an adaptation of English to the tonal Twi language, Wright resents it as a form
of inferiority and vows to never speak it because its lexical limitations suggest the Africans’ limited intellectual capacity and inability to grasp abstract concepts. Ultimately, the travel writer assigns the extreme corporeality of the African and his lack of rational voice to his religious beliefs – because he interacts with an assumed invisible world and seems addicted to a “form of physical lyricism”.

Then, it is not surprising that, even when Wright has the opportunity to hear and understand Africans, he fails to do so. On one such occasion, the travel writer asks an accompanying boy whether his grandfather remembers old history; when the old man starts to tell him of his knowledge, Wright, much to the reader’s surprise, ends the conversation abruptly by thanking the boy for his kindness. Conversely, he listens in patience to such fabulous tales as that of the king’s stool or to an anecdote by an African king about his army of ants. Wright does not listen to the traditional Africans when they do make sense probably, one may assume, because in his view their words cannot make rational sense. In Western eyes, they cannot and may not signify rational meaning. That is because the tribal mind, Wright argues in circle, is “sensuous: loving images, not concepts; personalities, not abstractions; movement, not form; dreams, not reality” (Black Power 264). The symbolic distance between Africans and Africans-Americans is further emphasized through an illustrative excerpt from The African Morning Post. The missing letters, the faulty presentation of facts and the amateurish format and paging illustrate an unprofessional, superficial journalism that serves to demonstrate once more the intellectual gap between Africa. As Wright questionably comments, “the Gold Coast press differs sharply from the press of the African American Negro. If one ignored the names, one would never know that the press was giving news of the blacle people” (Black Power 187-8). This remark is probably based on the similar convention and equal value of African American and white press, as Wright could not have been ignorant of their different thematic and motivating focus. Wright’s point of the overall limited influence of African-American and the rest of the world for that matter is conveyed in the observation that the African newspaper and the African itself are locally specific, as “African ideas and culture do not fare well on alien soil and the African has no hankering for foreign parts” (Black Power 188). The cited letter of the United Missionary Alliance requesting a territory in Shana for missionary work equally stresses the African-American’s degree of superior enlightenment, for they, too, are returning to Africa, in piching up the colonialist reflex, to civilize and bring religion to Africans. It is no wonder that such a harsh painted picture of African primitiveness has met the disapproval of Wright’s African and Pan-African readership.

Furthermore, what usually emerges from Wright’s attendance of Ghanaian political gatherings is not a better understanding of the Ghanaian fight for freedom, but Wright’s apprehensive interpretation of Gold Coast politics as “smacked of the dreamlike, of the stuff which art and myths are made” (Black Power 82). He silences the leaders of political parties in his interviews and mostly emphasizes his own interpretations and reactions. Even though the accounts of Ghanaian officials such as Mr. Baako and Mrs. Cudjoe are potential sources of more comprehensive information about the Convention People’s Party and Ghanaian life, Mrs. Cudjoe, for instance, is dismissed for the fault of being “simple, direct and factual”, “incapable of grasping abstract ideas she could not give broad, coherent descriptions” (Wright Black Power 102). Wright’s opposition of objectivity and abstraction holds since, while his own description of Africa is broad, coherent, and capable of grasping the abstract, it fails to be simple, direct and factual. Generally, when the educated African finally speaks to Wright, the former is accused of opaqueness or sheer cupidity; during a conversation with Mr. Haherson, Wright muses again that “most Africans are not communicative unless it’s for material reasons” (Black Power 181).

The writer does not even dwell on Nkrumah’s political speeches, although the witnessing of Ghanaian political developments was supposed to be one of the primary motives of his travel. Wright merely summarizes Nkrumah’s most important speech, petitioning for self-government, but emphasizes his own interpretation of it in terms not of content, but of rhetoric. Nevertheless, revealing the real focus of his preoccupations, he extensively records his own speech at the Convention People’s Party, a speech that centres on slavery, Wright’s own American identity, and
the common experience of human suffering. In the same rhetoric of distance, Wright’s own speech to the convention abounds in deictic pronouns of immediate alterity such as “your country”, “your great and respected Prime Minister”, whereas the speaker refers to himself, for persuasive purposes, as one of “the lost sons of Africa” – a stranger who shares with the Africans a history of suffering and a will for freedom. The speech highlights that Wright’s concern is not the Africans’ societal and world view; its climax is not about the Africans at all but about the African-American experience of slavery, with five paragraphs out of eight devoted to the topic. The speech proves once more that, at a deep-structure level, the travelogue’s destination is not Africa proper and its focus is not the African; on the contrary, it delineates a self-centred journey in search for self-definition and assertion against the African racial background.

4. A Land of Pathos

To the rational, individualistic Wright, the incomprehensible Africa is epitomized in a leitmotivic term, “pathos”, which the writer explicitly employs in a peculiar, Nietzschean sense. The word appears several times throughout the travelogue and features in the book’s subtitle, “A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos”. The first time it appears in the text proper, “pathos” is used to describe the condition of a young African man who approaches Wright to ask him for money in order to take a correspondence course in detective work from the US. The young man explains that his motivation for taking the course is to fight all criminal actions of British colonialists: “Detective work’s for catching criminals, sar. That’s what the English are, sar” (Wright Black Power 72). Wright is appalled at what he assesses as a “warped view of reality” (Black Power 73) underlain by pathos. The second time the word occurs, it is used to describe Wright’s own reaction upon being insistently propositioned by a female prostitute: “I shook my head, filled with pathos” (Black Power 165), in the sense of rejection. By the third time the word is employed, it is already being used to generally describe the condition of the African in Wright’s view. Thus, the term of pathos re-emerges at one of the key moments in the narrative, after Wright has watched Nkrumah make a speech before the Legislative Assembly, “petitioning Her Majesty’s government to enact the necessary legislation for Gold Coast self-government” (Black Power 169). After the tabling of the petition, Nkrumah is carried outside into the celebrating crowd, whereas Wright remains a distant observer: “But I was apprehensive about a reality that lurked behind the reality I saw... And a phrase from Nietzsche welled up in me: the pathos of distance... It was not what Nkrumah had said but what he had left unsaid that induced in me a mood of concern, of uneasiness” (Black Power 170). Therefore, pathos, a term of Western extraction appears to be what Wright identifies as the experience of the distance between the African and the Westerner, between his observing eye and the object of his gaze. In signifying the travel writer’s position as a stranger, pathos underlies Richard Wright’s rhetoric of distance.

Wright inscribes himself from the very beginning as a Westerner, and it is this acute consciousness of the Westernness of his identity that causes him to adopt the distancing attitude to Africa. Thus, through such an assessment of Africa as “Today the ruins of their former culture, no matter how cruel and barbarous it may seem to us, are reflected in timidity, hesitance, and bewilderment” (Wright Black Power 153), Wright positions, positioning himself as an agent of the Western gaze, addressing a like-minded audience. While he claims to use Marxism on scientific grounds and does not explicitly advocate the West’s colonial expansion, Wright never fails to present the West as the climax of culture and civilization. When he emphatically writes that the “fortuity of birth” had cast him in the role of being an African-American and that he was thus accounted of being of African, that is, Negro descent (Black Power 11), the choice of words of accident like “fortuity”, “role” and “accounted as” denote his perceived arbitrariness of blackness and Wright’s schizoid distance not only from the black object of his gaze, but also from the black color of his skin.

The correlated severance from Africa and from race achieved by Wright’s rhetoric of distance was justified as a historical necessity by Amiri Baraka, among others, who observes that “the adjustment
necessary for the black man to enter completely into a white American society was a complete disavowal that he or part of his culture has ever been anything else but American” (qtd. in Smith 184); this is why the writer explicitly discards any African, i.e. ‘primitive’, attributes of himself. Michel Fabre emphasizes Wright’s contention that the African-American is plainly an American, a Westerner, not an African in disguise; in doing so, Wright not only contests the Africanist myth of the noble savage but, without being fully aware of it, claims Fabre, the ideology of negritude that tends to endow blacks with more soul and humanity than the rational Western white (Fabre 169).

Yet Wright’s lack of awareness in disavowing negritude is questionable, as he clearly declares in his travelogue and elsewhere that he is averse to negritude beliefs and Black Power itself makes a statement of Wright’s distancing himself from the pan-African tradition. That is because Wright does not conceive of (his) identity in racial or ethnic terms, which he makes clear throughout the travelogue, but in social and historical ones. His own blackness does not signify a racial/ethnic connection to the continent and his body is perceived as foreign, he assumes, in the eyes of the natives. Then, Wright finds no other solution than to negate Africanness, promoting a social and historical identity at the expense of a racial and ethnic one. In fact, his strategy in dealing with race is to ponder on other people’s racialist thought and then revert immediately to his own counter-racial thinking.

Thus, the travelogue’s stated aim of providing an examination of African life and of Western attitudes to it turns into an African-American assertion, and Wright uses his voyage to Africa as a pretext for inscribing the identity of the African-American. As Chiwengo observes, the focus of Black Power lies not on the encounter with Africans but on the rise to subjectivity of the African-American (Chiwengo 27). While Wright often alludes to his minority status and his deprivation of freedom and authentic voice in America, he projects the same oppressive pattern on the African in order to facilitate the African-American’s ascendance to subjectivity. In this case, the African-American becomes one of the two opposed terms characterized by the presence of a set of positive features – such as culture, civilization, history, consciousness; the African is the negative term, necessitating the assistance of the West. The latter has the alternative of helping Africa nobly or losing it into nonexistence. The travel writer, who distances himself permanently from the people he describes by using a communal “the Africans” and placing it in ever a generalized and abstracted context, serves to reinforce the gap between the African-Americans and the Africans. In the process of inscribing his African-American self in travel (and) writing, Wright asserts his presence and subjectivity by silencing the African. Ironically enough, Wright’s self-inscription on the African object in Black Power eventually posits the West as the specking subject. Instead of showing the West its “hard and inhuman face” as mirrored in the consciousness of those “who live outside its confines” (Wright Black Power 2), all the voices in the narrative hail the West as the paramount of civilization. The African voice hardly emerges, and, when it does, it is translated into the general chous.

5. Conclusion

Re-placing the colonial master, Wright the Westcentric subject, defines himself not only as opposed to the African but also as different from the African-American. A Black author living in Paris, Wright is always already an exile from both the African and the American society: he is a black man in Western eyes and a westerner in the eyes of Africans.

While Wright’s African journey in 1953 has Liverpool as the initial departing point, making Europe serve theoretically as the point of departure and return of his travel. Wright remains a radical exile, for whom both America and Europe are sites of his displacement and mis-belonging. Wright’s Parisian place of exile may grant him freedom but preserves his marginality as the years in Paris separate Wright from America. Moreover, Wright’s position in his native America is a problematic one, for he is “inside, but not organically of the West” (Gilroy 151). Consequently, Wright’s initial American point of departure is as scholars have shown, a problematized space – socially and historically constructed as a land of exile, for which Africa should serve as a point of origin (Chiwengo 20); but Africa, too, proves to be no home for Wright. N. Chiwengo maintains that,
“although Wright considers his European departure site his home, for him, unlike for his fellow Western travelers, the West is the socially constructed point of destination since it is solely his physical oikos and not his racial and initial geographical one” (21). However, *Black Power* shows nowhere that Wright considers Europe more or less his geographical home, but posits the West, with its values of individualism and reason, as his origin and destination of his frame of mind. Therefore, *Black Power* fails to capture, if it ever intended, the African consciousness and renders a picture of Africa through Western eyes and concepts; what it does capture, however, is Wright’s own exiliar consciousness in a radical self-determination both within and against Africanist paradigms. As Wright travels through Africa, Africans are never allowed to confirm or refute the interpretations applied onto them. Wright’s perspective, as shown above, objectifies and monopolizes Africa, apprehending the black continent through the usual Western stock metaphors of bestiality, ignorance and primitiveness. As a “record of reactions to a land of pathos”, the text provides an Africanist construction of Africa from which the writer then distances himself, and both motions take place within the framework of Western discourse.

Wright’s authorial persona, the ruling subjectivity of the travelogue, is much like that of what George Kent called the “exaggerated Westerners” (79), especially with regard to the voice and posture he moulded in order to reach those whom he perceived to be his (Western) audience. In associating Richard Wright with another typical black traveler figure, Booker T. Washington, Ellison claims in accusatory tone that “Wright found the facile answers of Marxism before he learned to use literature as a means for discovering the forms of American Negro humanity” (120). In the case of both African-American figures, the speech and thought they espoused led to a necessary denial of certain African-American founding ideas; hence they were, in their authorial posture, exaggerated individuals alienated from their race and, to some degree, from themselves. Thus, even when they take on the task of creating themselves in literature, their vision is shaped by this state of ‘exaggeratedness’. In promoting this association to his purpose of describing Wright’s eventual place in the African-American tradition, R. Stepto notes that, “beyond all questions of era and place rests the simple fact that Washington was in control of the implications of his authorial posture, while Wright was not” (60-62). However, against Stepto’s assessment, Wright can be said to model himself as a Westerner, that is, into a mainstream cultural identity, not because he were a “confused man” as Stepto concludes, but because he is a mobile intellectual, a cosmopolitan in search of a community transcending the predicaments of race. The travel writer will eventually find such an identity during his African, European and Asian travels, within his very position of a stranger.

As an intellectual formed in the tradition of Western discourse, Wright becomes aware of the “made” nature of his self as Western, marginal, and elitist and it is by means of literal and literary travel that Wright’s progress shall eventually attain a sense of belonging, though not to a geographical or ethnic community. In his physical and mental condition as a black man living on the margin of both American and European culture, Wright finds a connection to the ideology of what he proposes as the Westernized and tragic elite of Asia, Africa and the West Indies to whom *White Man, Listen!* is dedicated, “the lonely outsiders who exist precariously on the cliff-like margins of many cultures – men who are distrusted, misunderstood, maltreated, criticized by left and right, Christian and pagan – men who carry on their frail but indefatigable shoulders the best of two worlds” (*White Man* 7). A (dis)community of mobile intellectuals like Wright himself, the tragic elite of the Third World – who is depended upon for leadership during the process of gaining independence – is afforded a privileged access to knowledge as a direct consequence of its existence “on the margins of many cultures”, seeking desperately for “a home for their hearts: a home which, if found, could be a home for the hearts of all men” (*White Man* 7). Such alienation becomes the source not only of knowledge, but also of actions of historical consequence. This (dis)community of ideological exiles, made available to the cosmopolitan Wright through travel, becomes the mirror image of his own identity as formed and expressed in *Black Power* and subsequent works. It is in this mirror that Wright shapes a conception of his life and work: “I’m a rootless man... I like and even cherish the state of abandonment, of aloneness... It seems to me the natural, inevitable condition of
man, and I welcome it. I can make myself at home almost anywhere on this earth” (Wright *White Man* 17) Eventually, it is not a geographical, racial or ethnic home that Wright finds in his travels, but an ideal home built in Western letters.
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