

# Richard Wright's Interrogation of Negritude: Revolutionary Implications for Pan Africanism and Liberation

by

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## Introduction

This paper will discuss Richard Wright's critiques of negritude as proposed by Africana philosophers like Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire, by illuminating the significance of Richard Wright's works that critiqued capitalism, particularly *Black Boy*, *Black Power*, *The Color Curtain*, *Native Son*, and *White Man, Listen!*, and other related writings. It will delve into the subject of Wright's insightful critiques of Western colonialism and imperialism, his advocacy of the solidarity of all colonized and colored peoples of the world in resistance to Western imperialism, and his struggles with Indigenous cultural world views in the lives of Black, Brown, Red, and Yellow peoples, especially in acknowledging his own sense of being a "rootless" person in the Western world. It will conclude with didactic lessons from Wright's works for advancing liberation and decolonization struggles of the oppressed peoples of the world besieged by rapacious capitalism, environmental annihilation, Indigenous cultural and socio-economic obliteration, and personal alienation entombed by the shackles of a greed-obsessed and materialistic-driven Eurocentric global society.

## Historical Background of Richard Wright's Visit to Africa and His Critique of Negritude

Richard Wright has been considered one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, particularly in his amazing ability to capture the reality of the Black experience in the United States and the obdurate nature of white supremacy and racism that has been bent on destroying the humanity of Black people and other people of color in the world. In reading his *Rite of Passage*, little tear drops welled in my eyes as I reflected on the horrific and intentionally excruciating policies and practices of white America in placing Black children in particular in foster homes and irrationally and willfully tearing them apart from the families with which they establish consanguineous bonds over time, a classic case of modern day capture, removal, and enslavement.

I have two young sons whom I could never imagine being torn from me for any reason. As Arnold Rampersad writes in the afterword of *Rite of Passage* (based on Wright's experiences in visiting New York foster homes where over half of those in such homes were Black):

In *Rite of Passage*, Johnny does not collide with a racial taboo. Instead, his life is changed by the government bureaucracy in the area of human welfare and social services—although the way this bureaucracy (which may include some blacks) treats young blacks must have to do with race and racism. The power and carelessness of the white world may be inferred from the policies and actions of the authorities who insist that Johnny must be sent to a new home, even as it is clear that these authorities have only the most limited respect for blacks and the poor in general...

...As in virtually all of Wright's work, race and racism are potent factors in *Rite of Passage*. The power of whites to affect the lives of blacks is clear and ever present. Wright refers to isolated examples of racism, or of careless attitudes of whites toward blacks, such as the negligence that leads to the gang member Baldy losing his hair and acquiring his nickname, as well as much of his bitterness and malevolence. Authority is generally white and alien to the lives of these Harlem blacks.<sup>1</sup>

The Black woman in *Rite of Passage* is a metaphor of the Black home of security; the foster home system is integral to the experience of oppression and alienation endemic to American racism that atomizes Black families in particular. Similarly, in Wright's ground-breaking, internationally acclaimed work that illuminates the entrapment of the Black poor in the ghettoized slums of the United States, *Native Son*, it was of no small consequence that half way through the writing of the novel, a case involving the beating death of a white woman in Chicago, Florence Johnson, led to the conviction and eventual execution of Robert Nixon.<sup>2</sup>

The *Chicago Tribune* reported the murder as a sex crime even though no evidence of rape was documented. Wright's painstaking research on urban environments where poor Black people lived and his personal experience living in the sweltering heat of the oppressive south in the United States provided fecundate grist for his novels that were often based on historical scenarios or events.

Wright's critique of racism in *Black Power* is akin to the caustic critique of the African writer, Chinweizu, in his classic, *The West and the Rest of Us: White Predators, Black Slavers, and the African Elite*, particularly when he writes in his reflections on the port of Liverpool in England:

In 1790, the abolition of the slave trade would have ruined Liverpool; her estimated loss from abolition was then computed at over seven and a half million pounds. Profits from the slave trade built Liverpool docks, the foundations of the city were built of human flesh and blood....<sup>3</sup>

And on the West African coast of Ghana:

In 1441 a Portuguese navigator, one Antonia Gonzales, launched the slave trade on these shores by kidnapping Africans; evidently the Christians of Portugal liked the services of those blacks, for Gonzales returned in 1442 for another shipload. Thus were inaugurated those acts of banditry which, as the decades passed, were erected into an institution that bled Africa and fattened Europe. In the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the slave trade took on a definite historic pattern and soon became the dominant passion of the Western world.<sup>4</sup>

And on European deceit and fraud in their historic interaction with Africa:

How had Europeans gotten a toehold upon this shore? Had they sneaked in? Had the naïve natives invited them in? Or had they fought their way forward in bloody battles? It was none of these; it had been through guile... a guile which enthroned distrust as a cardinal element in the African attitude toward Europe, a distrust that lives on in the African heart until this day.<sup>5</sup>

Richard Wright was actively involved in the formation and establishment of *Presence Africaine* in 1947-48, an organization dedicated to the propagation of works by writers from around the Black world in the addressing of themes of oppression and colonization of people of Africa and the Diaspora.<sup>6</sup> Wright's critique of negritude needs to be framed against this historical backdrop that underscores the tremendous and visceral efforts that Wright made in modeling the role of Black writers and artists in the world as truth tellers in explicating the authenticity of the Black experience even when it was uncomfortable for white oppressors and the oppressed of color alike.<sup>7</sup>

Wright expressed his profound disappointment at the hostile reception by so many readers and audiences to his trenchant and poignant writings on the Black experience of subjugation in the world, as he noted in a letter to his Dutch friend on March 30, 1960, Margrit de Sablonière, “So far as the Americans are concerned, I’m worse than a communist, for my work falls like a shadow across their policy in Asia and Africa...Truth-telling today is both unpopular and suspect.”<sup>8</sup> It is precisely this reason that he was accused of being a puppet of the U.S. State Department or working for the CIA, inferred by some critics from W. E. B. Du Bois’s telegraphed paper describing all those U.S. writers who were able to receive passports to travel to the 1956 Conference of Black Writers and Artists in Paris as suspect for succumbing to political pressure to “...say the sort of thing which our State Department wishes the world to believe.”<sup>9</sup> Yet Wright himself was subjected to surveillance by the FBI and constantly experienced difficulties in traveling abroad from the United States after his split with the Communist Party in 1942.<sup>10</sup> His supposed concern that the conference would be dominated by communists that was conveyed to the U. S. embassy in Paris needs to be thoroughly scrutinized for its authenticity.<sup>11</sup>

Wright invariably found himself at odds with the philosophy of negritude propounded by leading theoreticians like Leopold Senghor and Alioune Diop from Senegal, Leon Damas, and Aimé Césaire from Martinique. The first Conference of Black Writers and Artists (*Congres des Ecrivains et Artistes Noirs*) was held at the Sorbonne in 1956. It was Diop who observed that *Presence Africaine* was open to all, “white, yellow and black” who were concerned with helping “to define the creativity of the African and to speed his integration into the modern world.”<sup>12</sup> Leopold Senghor crystallized the concept of negritude in his article, “Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century,” when he averred:

Negritude is nothing more or less than what some English-speaking Africans have called the African personality. It is no different from the “black personality” discovered and proclaimed by the American New Negro Movement. As the American Negro poet Langston Hughes wrote after the First World War: “We, the creators of the new generation, want to give expression to our black personality without shame or fear...We know we are handsome. Ugly as well. The drums weep and the drums laugh.”...

But, once again, what is negritude? Ethnologists and sociologists today speak of different civilizations. It is obvious that peoples differ in their ideas and their languages, in their philosophies and their religions, in their customs and their institutions, in their literature and their art. Who would deny that Africans, too, have a certain way of conceiving life and of living it? A certain way of speaking, singing, and dancing: of painting and sculpturing, and even of laughing and crying?

Nobody, probably; for otherwise we would not have been talking about “Negro art” for the last sixty years, and Africa would be the only continent today without its ethnologists and sociologists. What then is negritude? It is---as you can guess from what precedes---the sum of the cultural values of the black world, that is, a certain active presence in the world, or better, in the universe...it is a humanism of the twentieth century...

...So, for the African, living according to the moral law means living according to his *nature*, (italics mine) composed as it is of contradictory elements but complementary life forces.<sup>13</sup>

In his work, *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, classical literature scholar and Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, demolishes the premises of negritude because of its reification and ahistoricism. He contended that the proponents of negritude uncritically accepted the ideological assumptions of white supremacy for it removed Africans from the historical evolution of all human cultures and became trapped within a racist epistemology that made the monocultural experiences of Europe the yardstick by which all other cultures were assessed, particularly in the tacit acceptance of the European philosophical definition of *reason* as universal. Soyinka argued that negritude was developed by a small elite group of Black intellectuals in Europe under the tutelage of European existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre that never had currency among the grassroots of Africa. Soyinka castigated African intellectuals in general for accepting the distorted and hegemonic presuppositions of European epistemology that essentially spewed racist claptrap cast as authoritative knowledge:

This process of intellection requires the propagandist knack of turning the unprovable into an authoritative concept, indoctrinating society into the acceptance of a single, simple criterion as governing any number of human acts and habits, evaluations and even habits of understanding. (Freudianism is one of the most notorious modern examples). The criterion proliferates, creates its own special language and its microworld of hierarchic subconcepts in an internally cohering pattern. The European intellectual temperament appears to be historically conducive to the infiltration of such mono-criteria. It is the responsibility of today’s African intellectual not only to question these criteria, but also to avoid the conditioning of the social being by the mono-criterion methodology of Europe.<sup>14</sup>

Aimé Césaire, on the other hand, was fully conscious of the fundamental pitfalls of metaphysical concepts of negritude and utilized a Marxian framework to critique the historicity of European colonial oppression and capitalist exploitation in his work, *Discourse on Colonialism*, while arguing for the consideration of the particularity of the Black cultural experience. Césaire denounced the perverse manner that Europe proclaimed “civilization,” a claim that was morally untenable because,

A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization.

A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization.

A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization.

The fact that the so-called European civilization—“Western” civilization—as it has been shaped by two centuries of bourgeois rule, is incapable of solving the two major problems to which its existence has given rise: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem: that Europe is unable to justify itself either before the bar of “reason” or before the bar of “conscience”; and that increasingly, it takes refuge in a hypocrisy which is all the more odious because it is less and less likely to deceive.

Europe is indefensible.

...the chief culprit in this domain is Christian pedantry, which laid down the dishonest equations Christianity equals civilization, paganism equals savagery, from which there could not ensue abominable colonialist and racist consequences, whose victims were to be the Indians, the yellow peoples, and the Negroes.<sup>1516</sup>

Césaire insisted that Black peoples preserve the particular legacy of African cultures in the promulgation toward an independent Africa and liberated Black world and that “the shortest road to the future is always the one through the thorough study of the past.”<sup>17</sup>

Richard Wright disagreed with the protagonists of negritude and in his paper, “Tradition and Industrialization,” criticized the “fragile and tragic elite of Africa” and called upon “...the white men of Europe” to provide the tools to industrialize and modernize the African continent so that it could be wrenched from the tentacles of oppression, economic impoverishment, and social instability.<sup>18</sup> His paper provoked anger among the conference participants because he appeared to backtrack and contradict his article on Black nationalism, “Blueprint for Negro Writing.”<sup>19</sup> For Wright, the continued clutching on to the African ancestral heritage and refusing to be liberated from the African “dead past” and the “fetish religion” was the problem.<sup>20</sup>

Such religio-cultural reverence for the past was futile in his view because it failed to extinguish the tenacious twin monsters of colonialism and economic impoverishment in Africa. He felt that it was only through exposure to Western democratic ideals that Africans could become political nationalists and win genuine independence and freedom for the continent. Subsequently, Wright distanced himself from numerous organizations that he viewed as too culturally tied to the past such as *Présence Africaine*, the Society for African Culture, and the American Society for African Culture. In late 1956, he conveyed his discomfort with *Présence Africaine* because he felt that it was being influenced by the French government and averse to African nationalist liberation.<sup>21</sup> He refrained from participation in the second Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome on Easter, 1959, because he felt that the Papacy and conservative Catholics would have negative political sway at the meeting. The presence of Alioun Diop who was Catholic and the financial power wielded by Catholicism may have been factors in Wright's reluctance to participate in the Rome gathering.

## **Richard Wright's Struggles and Contradictions in Understanding African Continental Culture**

Richard Wright acknowledged that he was a product of the West, albeit a person of African descent. He explained:

Since I'm detached from, because of racial conditions, the West, why do I bother to call myself Western at all? What is it that prompts me to make an identification with the West despite the contradiction involved? The fact is I really have no choice in the matter. Historical forces more powerful have shaped me as a Westerner. I have not consciously elected to be a Westerner. I have been made into a Westerner. Long before I had the freedom to choose, I was molded a Westerner. It began in childhood. And the process continues.<sup>22</sup>

Richard Wright was honest enough to concede his limitations in understanding the depth of the African cultural heritage. He explained that he was a "rootless man," but hastened to add that he was not "psychologically distraught" or "emotionally perturbed because of it."<sup>23</sup> Yet this is not a nonchalant statement on the part of one who functioned for the most part in a Western and European setting in the second half of his life while being of African descent, because it ignores the deep cultural and cosmological moorings of most peoples in the world, particularly the Indigenous peoples of Africa, the Americas, and Asia, where individuality is routinely collectively defined and always viewed in the context of the specificity of one's community culture, religion, and history. Wright was obsessed with the immediate need of African liberation and independence from the shackles of Western colonialism and economic subjugation. It is unequivocal that his first visit to Ghana was problematic.

Notwithstanding his determination and excitement about witnessing an African nation at the cusp of its political independence from British colonialism, he paradoxically reflected Western supremacist dispositions that he found abominable among whites during his stay in Ghana. For instance, his response to a salesman in a Ghanaian store on whether he had been able to find his African ancestral roots, was, "Well...you know, you fellows who sold us and the white men who bought us didn't keep any records."<sup>24</sup> This distorted Eurocentric and self-rejection view that assigned blame to Africans for the trade in human beings fits well with the racist argument that goes: Africans were steeped in slavery anyway, so why the outrage when Europeans expanded this institution to span across the Western hemisphere?<sup>25</sup> He was unable to shake off the baggage of his Western upbringing and orientation while he was in Africa, and "his Westernness constantly..." asserted "...itself in his preoccupation with matters such as sanitation."<sup>26</sup> Wright experienced cultural schizophrenia during his visit to Ghana, distancing himself from the African continent and *otherizing* the Africans in *Black Power*, even reading Western books to learn more about African cultural practices while in Ghana. Ngwarsungu Chiwengo, a professor at Creighton University, writes:

Despite the numerous proofs of the resiliency, he maintains that he does not know how to dance and sing or have the ability to comprehend African practices despite his twinned blackness. Wright's failure to understand Africa and its African American connections to it reflects his desire to be construed as a Western, American product. He admits that African practices survive in America, but he attributes them to myth and human nature...in *Black Power*...Wright also distances himself racially from the African. According to him, his very blackness signifies his alienation from the continent and his very body stands for foreignness in the eyes of the natives. Wright's travel to Africa is not a pilgrimage of identity, but an odyssey to confirm the African American's racial and cultural difference.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps this was the reason that Kwame Nkrumah did not respond to Wright's request to teach in Ghana.

Wright's enthusiasm for attending the Bandung conference of Asian and African people in Indonesia is indicative of his impassioned dedication to the independence of all colonized and colored peoples of the world. While he recognized too that objectivity is a misnomer and that all persons and communities are limited by the subjectivity of their individual contexts and experiences,<sup>28</sup> he nevertheless urged the development of Western objectivity, when he cried:



But the struggle in the Gold Coast is not over. The European has been driven from Africa, but can the African drive out of himself that religious weakness that enabled the European to enter his land so easily and remain there for centuries? Can the African get *Africanism* out of Africa? Can the African overcome his ancestor-worshipping attitudes and learn to doubt the evidence of his senses as Descartes taught the Europeans to do, and master the techniques of science and develop a spirit of objectivity?<sup>29</sup>

It was not religious or theological weakness that compelled the European conquest of Africa. As the author, Chinweizu, cogently explains:

But race did not conquer us; it was overwhelming power that did so. The color of our skin did not defeat us on the various battlefields of the nineteenth century; it was firepower—Maxim guns, whiffs of grapeshot and threats thereof.<sup>30</sup>

Chinweizu stresses that it was not the weakness of Africa's culture that allowed the advent and entrenchment of European colonial occupation, but Africa's failure to develop weapons that would have matched those of European colonizers and liquidated the military designs of the occupiers. Chinweizu rebuts the Negritude movement as Wright did because the proponents of Negritude myopically and fruitlessly attempted to disprove white racist views of African people to "prove" African humanity, all part of the ideological entrapment game set by colonialism so that Africans (and other colored peoples) would eventually and inevitably come to question the veracity and normalcy of their humanity. Wright would concur with Chinweizu but would differ from the latter on the role of culture in revolutionary liberation and transformation since Chinweizu derives from a West African cultural background and cherishes his cultural roots, albeit while being critical of its limitations and weaknesses. Wright's Western background, on the other hand, functions as a handicap in his understanding of culture because he could not fully fathom the far-reaching spiritual moorings and historical matrices within which the histories of African peoples, Asian peoples, and other Indigenous peoples are derived, where religio-culture was the only glue that has held such peoples together. It was the same Indigenous culture of Africa that resisted the onslaught of Portuguese colonialism in Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea Bissau, the same culture that mobilized the peasantry in Kenya and launched the Mau Mau uprising against British colonialism, and the same collective culture that sparked the Soweto insurrection of June 16, 1976 that eventuated in mass Black resistance which hastened the collapse of formal apartheid in Azania/South Africa. As Wright noted in his books, *Black Power* and *White Man, Listen!*, Africans and Asians are attached to their ancestors and revere the land where their ancestors are buried, as Jomo Kenyatta described in his 1960s book, *Facing Mount Kenya*. Land is sacred to African and all Indigenous people, in fact, among most people in the world.

Their attachment to land grounds their social and personal identities and provides the basis for their vocations, family integration, religious ceremonies, and economic sustenance, elements that Wright learned from the cook of a white missionary. (It is curious as to why he would use the cook's view as authoritative, particularly since the missionary functioned as the translator for his cook).<sup>31</sup> Yet Wright misunderstood the cook's illumination of deep ancestral bonds and instead used the information to explain why Africans were sold into slavery, "to be a slave was proof that one had done something bad," as he noted. Again, Wright sadly imposes a distorted Western view on a cardinal principle held in all Africans and among other Indigenous cultures for millennia: the sacredness of land and ancestral bonds.

It is only Western Europe that has been the anomalous continent that denied the primacy of human beings being culturally moored in the lands of their origin. *The rootlessness of European colonialism that saw the mass exodus of people from the sixteenth century derives from Europe's own self-destructive and ruthless culture where people erased much of its forests from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, overfished its seas in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and destroyed much of the animals and the rest of the natural world, including the poor, throughout the medieval and reformation period.* The European Enlightenment that Wright calls for universal human benefit cannot cater to the human condition because it is anchored in a destruction of the earth and annihilation of the natural world as is evident in Europe today.

Kirkpatrick Sale expatiates in his classic, *A Conquest of Paradise*, on this condition of pre-colonial Europe, an illumination essential for understanding how European feudalism developed into colonialism, then capitalism, and now crystallized under the umbrella of globalization, continuing its plunder and erasure of Indigenous peoples cultures and lands:

From these elemental patterns in Europe's tapestry of nature—ignorance and fear, separation and hostility, dominance and exploitation—a discernible image emerges: of a world more mechanistic than organic, more artificial than intrinsic, more corporeal than numinous, from which intimacy, sacredness, and reverence have all but vanished (it would be the achievement of the next five centuries to eliminate them entirely) and in which something colder, culler, and more lifeless presides instead.

As to the rest of what we know of Europe's ecological heritage, it can be seen written across the face of the land. With some significant exceptions, it is a record of deforestation, erosion, siltation, exhaustion, pollution, extermination, cruelty, destruction, and despoliation, all done either in the name of utility and improvement for the betterment of society or, as often, in ignorance of natural systems and the human connections to them.

...But no alteration of the landscape was so profound or purposeful as the erasure of the European forests...Europe's was a civilization literally made of wood: wood was used to build its houses, ships, mills, machinery, plows, furniture, plates, pipes, tools, carriages, even clocks and (at times) watches; wood and charcoal provided the fuel for heating and cooking in homes and shops, castles and cottages, and in all industries from bakeries and glassworks to ironworks and arsenals (*now they use oil—mine*)...All the great forests with which it (Europe) had been blessed—an essential energy resource denied, incidentally, to the civilizations of the Middle East and much of Asia—were steadily and recklessly depleted to serve that civilization, and by the sixteenth century there were virtually no old-growth areas, no natural ecosystems left.<sup>32</sup>

Kirkpatrick Sale explains that medieval Europe's antagonism towards its forests and natural ecology was transferred to the domain of animals and that "along with ferocity in the hunt for 'sport'" (bull-fighting in Spain, bear-baiting in Scandinavia, cockfights, etc), was the emphasis on flesh-eating, so that hunting and fishing became predominant industries in Europe that period, resulting in the depleting of fishing in the Mediterranean in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and in England, fish species like barbell, bream, and flounder drastically decreased and herring became a rare fish in the Baltics.<sup>33</sup> Contrary to the perception of medieval Europe as a place of tranquil and humane behavior, in contradistinction to Africa for example which was portrayed as the "Dark Continent," obsessed by orgiastic violence and marauding "tribes" in perpetual bloody warfare, Sale reminds us that:

Indeed, it is not fanciful to see *warring against species* as Europe's preoccupation as a culture, the source of its food as well as its furniture, its energy as well as its sport, its urban space as well as its agricultural sprawl, its images for the nursery as well as for its pulpits.<sup>34</sup>

Lest some feel that this is unfair and over-biased Europe-bashing on the part of a European American writer like Sale, he proceeds to provide a global context for his critique:

One could argue that all cultures, to some degree, "war against" their environment to achieve the necessities of life and no society can live without having some impact on, or even doing some violence to, the natural world: it is called survival. Is there something about the attitudes and practices of Europe that make it so different?

The answer would seem to be yes.<sup>35</sup>

Sale provides us with an explanation:

Other cultures were not uniformly so benign that they never misused their environments: China, for example, permitted its population expansion under several dynasties to lead to the clearing of forests and extermination of certain wild species; the Mayans permitted deforestation that eventually led to erosion and crop failures that in turn caused the downfall of Teotihuacan. But nowhere else was the essential reverence for nature seriously challenged, nowhere did there emerge the idea that human achievement and material betterment were to be won by *opposing* nature, nowhere any equivalent to that frenzy of defiance and destruction that we find on the Western record.<sup>36</sup>

What of the supremacy of European technology as Wright admonishes Africans to develop? Fast forward to this new millennium and the deification of Western technology, and we have Kirkpatrick Sale's words sounding increasingly prophetic, specifically on this question:

Europe's technophilia, its unchecked affection for the machine, also distinguished it among world cultures. The reasons for its are deep and tangled, but one can certainly say that Europe was more adept at turning technology to its own uses, and turning its institutions to the service of that technology, than any other society; in the judgment of Lewis Mumford, only Europe saw fit "to adapt the whole mode of life to the pace and capacities of the machine." Even those civilizations (Chinese, Persian, Japanese) that demonstrated a certain proficiency for mechanical inventiveness did not evolve an elaborate abstract system of rationality to go with it—we call it science—and thus did not develop a culture of technology, a self-propelling and self-reinforcing mode of thought that created its own purposefulness and momentum. Only Europeans, once learning of firearms from the Chinese, went on to perfect them with such ferocious skill that in the space of little more than a century they had far surpassed all other cultures in armaments; only Europeans, too borrowing again from many other cultures, refined and perfected the technology of ocean navigation as to become the supreme naval power in the world by the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese and Ottoman (*and Egyptian--mine*) accomplishments notwithstanding.<sup>37</sup>

Had it not been for this naval supremacy, European ships would never have been able to transport kidnapped enslaved Africans from Africa to transport them thousands of miles in conditions that resembled over packed sardine containers—culminating in the real Black holocaust of the world. Neither would European colonialism have been able to subjugate Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

How does Sale's carefully delineated criticism illuminate issues of culture in the contemporary world in which we African people live? Listen again to his sobering but very wise words:

Finally, there was Europe's material emphasis on material acquisitiveness and resource accumulation, usually obtained at the sacrifice of the natural world.<sup>38</sup>

Responding to those scholars and critics who explain that Europe underwent certain peculiar cultural changes owing to it being overcrowded and resulting in "particular social structures," Sale asserts that he is unconvinced by this argument about Europe's special material conditions justifying its acquisitive and rapacious cultural behavior:

But surely the chief reason for this was the power of the still young but increasingly vigorous capitalist system, moving into vacuums left by medieval institutions, the likes of which existed nowhere else: more materialist, for sure, than any other economy, more expansionist, more volatile and energetic, more linked to growth and progress, and almost everywhere without the kinds of moral inhibitions found in the world's other high cultures.<sup>39</sup>

Following this painstaking backdrop, we come to understand viscerally the manner that anthropological definitions of culture and those developed by social scientists were part and parcel of the Eurocentric colonializing project in the world, providing the ideological legitimization of the penetration of global Indigenous cultures and pillage of vital natural resources that had been depleted in a materially obsessed and violence-preoccupied medieval Europe. Thus, the colonizers claimed that they were the carriers of "culture" and "civilization" to the "uncultured" and "uncivilized" heathen. Luis Rivera's *A Violent Evangelism*, Adam Hochschild's *Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, and Sven Lindquist's *"Exterminate the Brutes": One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide*, furnish classic illustrations of the colonialist's encounter with "native savagery" in the Western hemisphere, Africa, and the Pacific and the formidable task of the white man's burden, that of civilizing Indigenous "barbarians."<sup>40</sup> It was in the same vein of what I call the *pathology of projection*, that specious images of "dirty" Africans were fabricated by European "scholars" and colonizers alike. Africans and other Indigenous peoples in the Western hemisphere and Asia and the Pacific were viewed as unclean, (and in the case of the Aboriginal people of Australia were classified as "fauna and flora" until constitutional changes in 1975!), even though Europeans were averse to bathing generally because they viewed it as sinful.<sup>41</sup>

Wright was absolutely correct when he contended that, “Too long has Africa been made into a psychological heap where white men dumped that part of themselves that Africa did not like.”<sup>42</sup> However, he was dead wrong when he equated the irrational racism of Europe with what he terms the “irrational ties of religion and custom and tradition of Asia and Africa.”<sup>43</sup> Wright was myopic when he assumed that the particular historical evolution among the marginalized and alienated peoples of medieval Europe that saw the depleting of all of its natural resources and its subsequent predatory plundering and heinous enslavement and extermination of Indigenous colored peoples around the world, as the norm for universal rationale and other human cultures. He failed to realize the ephemeral nature of Europe’s industrial expansion and technological development because it was rooted in a sense of linear time and predicated on the extraction of finite resources from the earth that ultimately would result in the progressive collapse and demise of its own culture as we behold the crises provoked by wars waged over oil and energy resources by the West against many Asian and African nations today. Wright was shortsighted too in not realizing that Western European technological culture and its obsession for material profit is insatiable. Western Europe’s legacy of war against Mother Earth, Indigenous peoples, and all life on the planet, from the Arctic Circle to the Amazon rainforest, from the Pacific Islands to the Sea of Japan, persists, in its unquenchable thirst and lust for riches for possession by the elites of the West and their surrogates.

So too, Wright overlooked the fundamental problem created by the “scientific” cultures of Europe—elitism—which benefits the few at the cost of the many, and is intrinsic to the evolution of Europe’s feudal cultures. When he urges that European elites provide the tools for the advancement of the elites of Asia and Africa so that the benefits of the Enlightenment and Reformation can be globally disseminated, he ignores the fundamentally dictatorial role that minority elites play in any society, particularly capitalist ones.<sup>44</sup> Chinweizu compares Africa’s elites of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries to the slavers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries when he avers:

...the collaboration of Africa’s present Westernized elite with their foreign masters must be seen to be at least as reprehensible as that which took place in slaving times.<sup>45</sup>

Wright’s over-optimism in the capability of African and Asian elites in leading their respective nations towards independence and sovereignty grossly under-estimated the role of African elites in the service of Western imperialism as is the case in most contexts of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, functioning as essential cogs in the machinery of capitalism. C. L. R. James, a noted radical Black theorist from the Caribbean whom Wright knew, summarized the shallow role that the middle classes in the Caribbean played, comparable to those of Africa, in his rebuke of these classes:

Knowledge of production, of political struggles, of the democratic tradition, they have had none. Their ignorance and disregard of economic development is profound and deeply rooted in their past and present situation. They do not seem to be aware of it. For several generations they have been confined to getting salaries or fees, money for services rendered. That is still their outlook.<sup>46</sup>

Though the elites of societies may vary, and Wright may have assumed that figures like Kwame Nkrumah and Aimé Césaire were prototypical of the political orientation of Western-educated elites who desired nothing less but the independence of their countries and peoples, he did not take into account the fiercely reactionary role that most ruling elites play in formerly colonized societies, the African continent serving as a classic substantiation of this point.

### **Implications of Richard Wright's Work for Pan Africanism and Black/Indigenous Liberation Movements Today**

Richard Wright was a brilliant writer who unashamedly described the truth of the Black world as he saw it from the vantage point of someone who grew up in the U.S. South and eventually left the United States to live in France. As with any person, including writers, he was a product of his times and subject to all of the limitations that intellectuals are conditioned by inevitably by virtue of personality, experience, and background. Notwithstanding the limitations of his insights as recounted in the preceding section, Wright's observations and insights are important for all people in the world struggling to overcome the tenacity of Western imperialism, neo-colonialism, and 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism. Wright did not understand viscerally the diabolical nature of Western technology and its irrepressibly alienating, dehumanizing, and anti-Earthly role in the world because he lived over 50 years ago.

First, Wright was determined to speak the truth about Black suffering and exposed the dehumanizing nature of white racism and oppression of Black people in the United States and in Africa, even when many critics, particularly in the United States, were determined to suppress the truth about the absurdity of Black suffering for popular acclaim such as Lorraine Hansberry in *Raisin in the Sun*. His *Native Son* shattered all illusions about being an affable Black writer desiring national recognition. He emphasized that truth telling was "...both unpopular and suspect."<sup>47</sup> The economic, political, and social discomfort truth-telling implies when it comes to Black writers and artists like W.E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, and Richard Wright, who were either denied passports and travel documents or faced political persecution by the U. S. government and in the case of Robeson saw income drop precipitously from \$100,000 to \$6,000, needs to be inspirational for all freedom-loving intellectuals today.<sup>48</sup>

The sad part of the academic and intellectual world in which we live today is that intellectual value is generally determined by corporate publishing houses and most Black authors are unwilling to sacrifice lucrative financial gain for the revealing of the angry truths about the lives of the oppressed. Public intellectuals who have their own speaking agencies in the United States come to mind here. In an era where commodity high-tech, new-wave capitalism can literally buy and sell anyone for a high financial price, it is an oddity to stand up for the principle of telling the truth by any means necessary, epitomized by Black giants like Malcolm X, W. E. B. Du Bois, Medgar Evers, Fanie Lou Hammer, and Cynthia McKinney, in the best tradition of Ashanti freedom fighter of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Yaa Asantewaa, whom Wright extolled as a model of revolutionary courage and bravery.<sup>49</sup>

Second, Wright elevated the question of women in different contexts. He was certainly aware that there was only one woman present at the Conference of Black Writers and Artists in Paris in 1956.<sup>50</sup> Although he was no feminist (there were few men of any stripe who elevated the question of the subordination of women in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), he was conscious of the experience of injustice that women experienced. In *Black Power*, he observed that the familial structure in Ghana is matrilineal and that women hold a “special and mystical position” and in situations of the death of the king, it was the women who consulted with advisors to determine the successor.<sup>51</sup> Wright contended that colonialism and Christianity “spelled the doom of the African woman” and that it was no coincidence that the last major battle of defense by the Ashanti against the British colonialists was none other than a woman, Yaa Asantewaa. He noted that a painted sign on a truck on the highway read, “FEAR WOMEN AND LIVE LONG...,” underscoring the centrality of women in the lives of people in Ghana.<sup>52</sup> In his novel, *Rite of Passage*, it is the role of nurturing, concerned, and resilient mother in the lives of estranged young Black men that comes to the fore, including in the final segment of the book, an experience that Wright himself did not enjoy for much of his young life due to the illness of his mother in the South. All of us who are especially male academics and writers can do much more by speaking less and doing more in advancing the material struggle of the Black poor particularly, and often need to take second place to the sisters of the struggle, who talk the least and do the most with the meager resources they have, be it food, monthly income, or holding fragile homes together. “Organize the women, and you organize the nation” is a popular revolutionary slogan that needs to materialize in all spheres of global society. I am convinced that the Black revolutionary struggle has not made headway in the world because we men often claim to know the most, but fail to embody the courage of so many of our revolutionary working class sisters, be they in the United States, the Caribbean, Africa, or anywhere in the colonized world.



Third, Wright was a fierce antagonist against capitalism. Despite the expression of his contradictory views during his visit to Africa, he underscored the connections between the tightness of African cultures and the communist philosophy. As Yoshinobu Hakutani notes, Wright saw it fit to retain the comment by an informant in Ghana, that Africans in communities of their kinship (I abhor the pejorative term, “tribe”) “...never starve...” that reflected “...Communism, but without any of the ideas of Marx or Lenin...” and “...a sacred origin.”<sup>53</sup> Though Wright disassociated himself from the Communist Party in the USA and was constantly wary of the Communists in Black struggles because of paternalism and racism, he nevertheless saw a place for the utilization of a Marxian critical framework to understand the injustices of the capitalist system in the world over the past five hundred years.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, Wright was extremely conscious of the need for colonized people to unite in the defense of their homelands against Western imperialism. This is precisely why he was determined to attend the Bandung conference where Asian and African leaders gathered to discuss international solidarity and resistance to the hegemony of Western European powers. Wright certainly supported the call for Pan African unity through his involvement in *Présence Africaine*, where he worked with African, Caribbean, and African American writers and scholars in attempting to advance the Pan African liberation movement. As he wrote:

If Asians and Africans can sink their national and religious differences for what they feel to be a common defense of their vital interests, as they did at Bandung, then that same process of unity can serve for other ends, for a rapid industrialization of the lives of the people of Asia and Africa, for a shaking loose of the Asian-African masses from a static past.<sup>55</sup>

Though Wright was deluded into believing as a Westerner that Asians and Africans would surrender their ancestral heritage for economic advancement and political power, he nevertheless brought a consciousness of solidarity of colored and colonized people in the wake of Western European colonial hegemony, a call that eventuated in the formation of the Non-Aligned movement that excited Black revolutionary leader, Malcolm X, in the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>56</sup> Wright firmly believed in the need for Black people across the world to understand and support each other’s struggles in the United States and Africa particularly. Even though he was not a staunch Pan Africanist advocate because of his emphasis on the need for individual freedom in political inclination, he still saw intrinsic value in the need for African descendants globally to resist racism and colonialism.

The African continent today needs to forge a unified economic bulwark against the global capitalist and imperialist system especially under the auspices of globalization and to integrate the economies of the various regions and countries into a Pan African continental economy. This unification needs to move beyond the feeble mandate of the African Union that is still grounded within a Western capitalist framework. The vital energy, agricultural, and industrial resources of Africa must be equitably shared among the peoples of the continent, particularly the poor and the rural. My vision of and blueprint for the Pan Africanist revolutionary society is described in one of my previous works, *Is Apartheid Really Dead? Pan Africanist Working Class Cultural Critical Perspectives*.<sup>57</sup> The role of the African Diaspora in the United States, the Caribbean, Asia, and Europe is key in the advancement of the Pan African vision and the realization of the goal of a truly sovereign, economically independent, and sustainable Africa, where an Indigenous and modern socialism germane to the particular needs of Africa is the underlying philosophy and culture.

The oversight in his advocacy of the solidarity of colonized peoples is indicated in his general silence on the Indigenous people of the Americas, even though he did have a portion of Indigenous blood running through his veins and mentions "...stealing and buying Africans to work the lands bought or stolen from the Indians..." and spoke of the cultural significance of the historical Indigenous leader, Montezuma, as Michel Fabre noted.<sup>58</sup> The elevation of the struggles of the first peoples of the Western hemisphere is an imperative by all Black scholars, particularly given the historic genocide suffered by Indigenous peoples in the Americas and the fact of consanguineous bonds that existed between the first enslaved Africans and Indigenous nations in the south and north east of the United States from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Indigenous nations often provided refuge to Africans running away from white slave-masters and Africans joined and intermarried with Indians so that today at least half of all people of African descent in the United States have some Indigenous ancestry.<sup>59</sup> These nexuses of solidarity are critical in advancing the continuing decolonization project for African and Indigenous people in the Americas, in Africa, and around the world, particularly around issues of land reclamation and return. Indigenous people as the first people of the Americas are the continent's original caretakers, and possess much in common with Indigenous societies in Africa. As the insane greed for oil and other energy resources pursued by hungry Western trans-national corporations continues at a maniacal rate and the destruction of the world's fragile ecosystems intensifies, from the Amazon rainforest to the rainforests of the Congo, and the oceans, seas, and rivers all over the world are now saturated with poisonous industrial and nuclear waste accruing from the explosion of electronic technologies for mass consumption, the ancestral wisdom that Wright shunned is now the most valuable of principles that need to be taught to and practiced by the younger generation in preparation for the next seven generations so that peace and stability in the world might be realized.<sup>60</sup>

Constance Hiliard's *Intellectual Traditions of Pre-Colonial Africa* is just one source of historical Indigenous African wisdom from all over the continent that demonstrates the complexity and practical relevance of the wisdom teachings of African peoples.<sup>61</sup>

Climate change is an integral part of our cultural landscape today. The polar ice caps and glacial sheets are melting as the result of global warming, the irruption of earthquakes like the one in Sichuan in China and the devastating cyclone in Myanmar in spring 2008, the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, the dust-bowl effect in the southwestern part of the United States and in southern Africa, and the destruction of the Amazon rainforest, the lungs of the planet and where one fifth of the freshwater on the planet is found and where 13,000 acres of forest are erased each day or an area the size of eight football fields per minute, has caused widespread suffering of humans, animal, insect, and plant life. Most disturbing is the fact that in this modern era "the normal trickle of extinction has become a gushing hemorrhage as 100 species or more disappear every day."<sup>62</sup> The astronomical rise in food prices and basic food products, like corn and soybeans due to clearing forests and fields for soy for ethanol consumption by the United States particularly, resulted in food riots in 30 countries. Black writers and artists must become involved in these Indigenous struggles to heal with Mother Earth so that she in turn can heal us all and the next seven generations. Richard Wright would hopefully have made some pronouncements on these subjects had he lived in this new 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Conclusion**

Richard Wright has left much for us as students of literature and life to ponder. The point of this paper was to illumine his critical insights and highlight his heart-felt commitment to the liberation of the oppressed and oppressor alike, and to demonstrate that life is not just about happiness, as Wright indicated to a friend, but most importantly, how one lives life with meaning. In understanding Richard Wright's limitations as a writer and critic, we come to understand our own limitations of living in a world that is beautiful but tainted with the ugliness of oppression and exploitation and where solutions demand careful and thoughtful reflection in the manner that life can be holistically lived for all of Mother Earth's children, not just the wealthy and powerful, privileged, and Western, the 100 million of the world's 6.5 billion people who have an income per capita of over \$20,000 per year.<sup>63</sup>

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