

The Necessary Pain  
of Moral Imagination:  
Lonely Delegation in Richard  
Wright's Haiku and  
*White Man, Listen!*

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## The Necessary Pain of Moral Imagination

### Abstract

Richard Wright gave a series of lectures in Europe from 1950 to 1956, collected in the following year in the volume, *White Man, Listen!* One dominant theme in all four essays is that expanding the moral imagination is centrally important in repairing our racism-benighted globe. What makes Wright's version of this claim unique is his forthright admission that expanding the moral imagination necessarily involves pain and suffering. The best place to hear Wright in regard to the necessary pain of expanding the moral imagination, I would argue, is his poetry collection, *This Other World: Projections in the Haiku Manner*. To wit, for Wright the necessary pain of expanding one's moral imagination is the loneliness that results from delegating to others—in the etymological sense of “deputizing or committing”—one's whiteness qua privilege or social capital. In conclusion, lonely delegation constitutes an imperative template from Wright regarding the painful expansion of our own moral imagination, in the service of social justice for economically oppressed communities of color across the globe.

### Keywords

Richard Wright  
Haiku  
Racism  
Moral imagination  
Social justice



One of the most important African-American novelists of the twentieth century, Richard Wright, gave a series of lectures in Europe from 1950 to 1956. The following year, these lectures—entitled “The Psychological Reactions of Oppressed People,” “Tradition and Industrialization,” “The Literature of the Negro in the United States” and “The Miracle of Nationalism in the Gold Coast”—were collected in the volume, *White Man, Listen!* One dominant theme in all four essays is that expanding the moral imagination is important in repairing our racism-benighted globe.<sup>1</sup> While this claim about the moral imagination’s role in ethics and politics is admittedly identifiable in multiple other theorists (such as Edmund Burke and Richard Rorty), what makes Wright’s contribution unique is his forthright admission that expanding the moral imagination necessarily involves pain and suffering.

The best place, I would suggest, to listen to Wright in regard to the necessary pain of expanding the moral imagination, is his poetry collection, *This Other World: Projections in the Haiku Manner*.<sup>2</sup> And what resounds most loudly in listening to this poetry is what I term “lonely delegation.” What I mean by this phrase is that, for Wright, the necessary pain of expanding one’s moral imagination is the loneliness that results from delegating to others—in the etymological sense of “deputizing or committing”—one’s whiteness qua privilege or social capital. In the case of Wright himself, this lonely delegation takes the form of his painfully allocating what little privilege he has—compared to the disempowered communities of color about which he writes—to imaginary fictional delegates from those communities. And these delegates, in turn, trigger the painful divesting of the much greater privilege of Wright’s white audience. In his haiku in particular (as opposed to his fiction), these imaginary delegates take the form of humans, nonhumans, and other ecological entities and forces.

To arrive at this new conception of lonely delegation, my article traces the following path. In my first section, I offer a brief consideration of *White Man, Listen!* with an emphasis on the moral imagination and its painful expansion. In my second section, I then perform a close reading of *This Other World*, revealing a dual theme in that poetry collection which I term “lonely delegation.” In my third section, I provide supporting evidence for my readings in the secondary literature on Wright. And in my conclusion, I weave together the foregoing themes in order to flesh out how lonely delegation constitutes an imperative template from Wright regarding the painful expansion of our own moral imagination.

## The Necessary Pain of Moral Imagination

Before I begin, however, I wish to offer one piece of evidence that Wright viewed the expansion of the moral imagination as painful. In a speech to a predominantly white audience, included in *White Man, Listen!*, Wright claimed he could singlehandedly accomplish this imagination-broadening pain and suffering in just six months with the willing participation of any supportive white person. The key to this method and its result? To transform the white person into a black person:

Indeed, I'd say to you here who listen to my words that I could convert any of you into Negroes, in a psychological sense, in a period of six months. That is, I could, by subjecting you to certain restrictions, hatreds, hostilities, etc., make you express yourselves as the American Negro formerly did.<sup>3</sup>

### I. White Man Listening to Haiku-Mannered Projections

Wright diagnoses one of the chief causes of global racial injustice as the imaginative poverty of white Westerners. The latter, he notes, are “always expressing astonishment” at being named “aggressors” in Asia and Africa, which in Wright’s view “reveals a singular poverty of imagination.”<sup>4</sup> That is, according to Wright, most white people cannot imagine their shared worlds from the perspectives of black people inhabiting them because white people remain (on average) unable to concretely imagine black people as full human beings. By this Wright means something analogous to the surprise that homophobic straight people often exhibit when they first realize that queer people also like to just hold hands or that some of them enjoy watching American football. That is, like anti-black racist people, such homophobic people cannot imagine—in rich, full, concrete, complex, and specific ways—the humanity of those whom they fear. This is not, of course, to suggest that the struggle of black and LGBT+ people are strictly equivalent but only that there are relevant similarities (as, for example, President Obama suggested by categorizing the 1969 Stonewall Riots as part of a broader civil rights movement).<sup>5</sup>

Wright articulates the psychological basis of the contracted white imagination by offering the following characterization of the typical Westerner of his day:

The emotionally thin-skinned cannot imagine, even in the middle of our twentieth century, a world without external

emotional props to keep them buttressed to a stance of constant meaning and justification, a world filled with overpowering mother and father and child images to anchor them in emotional security, to keep a sense of the warm, intimate, sustaining influence of the family alive.<sup>6</sup>

Note the causal implication Wright is making here. To wit, it takes “thick skin,” psychological toughness—or more precisely resilience—for the materially privileged to be able (perhaps in terms of courage) to imagine beyond the boundaries of our own comfort zones.

For Wright, what is even worse than this unconscious unimaginative torpor in Westerners is our colonizers’ explicit and conscious exportation of said torpor to the Afro-Asian colonized. “The imperialist,” Wright claims, “wanted the natives to sleep on in their beautiful poetic dreams so that the ruling of them could be more easily done.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, those in Wright’s “West,” who unintentionally imagine poorly from fear, have compounded that vice by trying to sustain imaginative poverty in his “East.” This colonial project has not been completely successful according to Wright, however, and has even produced the seeds of its own destruction.

Wright’s foremost example of the latter phenomenon is the founder and first president of Ghana (formerly “The Gold Coast”), Kwame Nkrumah. Wright offers a complex genealogy of the rise to power of Nkrumah and others like him. The West, according to Wright, when trying to educate an Eastern elite to be micromanagers of their indigenous societies, made one crucial mistake. Westerners “had no thought of how those Westernized Asians and Africans would fare when cast, like fishes out of water, back into their poetic cultures.”<sup>8</sup> In short, Westerners created a new kind of people whom Wright characterizes as hybrid beings. These new people, including Nkrumah, found themselves unmoored from their origins, lost in their own homes, and thus “had to sink or swim with no guides, no counsel.”<sup>9</sup>

As the case of Nkrumah and his self-transformative education already suggests, the remedy for this contractedness of white Western imaginations begins with imagining ourselves more broadly. The “West must accept its responsibility for colonization and its effects,” Wright claims, in order to “create the means by which white men can liberate themselves from their fears.”<sup>10</sup> To anticipate Wright’s elaboration of this point below, those who are white must imagine themselves differently, namely as those responsible for global injustice against worlds of color, in order—among other things—to heal the white people’s minds (including, ironically, their

## The Necessary Pain of Moral Imagination

imaginations). In other words, white people must grow their imaginations bigger than their current identities—painful though it be to have their boundaries stretched, as Wright suggests in the quote above—in order to occupy psyches at harmony with themselves and with their worlds.

Wright's central example of one such broadly imaginative white Westerner is Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish economist and sociologist. Myrdal is most famous in the U.S. for his landmark study of race relations, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy*, which the Supreme Court cited in their *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision ending formal segregation in the public schools. In a section of *White Man, Listen!* entitled "Acting," in the context of discussing how black people have "an almost unconscious tendency to hide their deepest reactions from those who they fear would penalize them if they suspected what they felt," Wright notes that in the U.S. "this acting is a perfected system; it is almost impossible for the white man to determine just what a Negro is really feeling, unless that white man, like a Gunnar Myrdal, is gifted with a superb imagination."<sup>11</sup> Note the parallelism here: white outsiders must use *imaginative* perception to see through the *imaginative* acting performance of black insiders. Moreover, in neither case does this imaginative power entail pure fiction or artistic creation. In the case of Myrdal, his imagination is part of his scientific creativity, and for black people under anti-black racism, their imaginations consist of stylized subterfuges based on their actual feelings.

The cost of failing to do this painful work of imaginative expansion, according to Wright, is the possibility that the very concept of truth as such will disappear from the world, since for him the imagination is a necessary condition for truth. "To imagine that straight communication is no longer possible is to declare," Wright claims, "that the world we seek to defend is no longer worth defending, that the battle for human freedom is already lost." Put differently, Wright views the inability to imagine truth as hastening truth's exodus from our shared world. In order to resist this loss, Wright himself imagines the following: that "man, when he has the chance to speak and act without fear, still wishes to be a man, this is, he harbors the dream of being a free and creative agent." The reason that the stakes of these two different kinds of imagining are so high is that, according to Wright, "there is no such thing as objectivity". Instead, he continues, "objectivity is a fabricated concept, a synthetic intellectual construction."<sup>12</sup> In other words, since there is no independent bedrock or bulwark for our constructions, if we imagine ourselves unfree we will become so.

In pursuit of this freedom through imagining truth, Wright constructs a kind of spectrum or continuum of imaginativeness extending from imaginative poverty to imaginative richness. “Let us *imagine* an abstract line,” Wright begins, “and at one end of the line let us *imagine* a simple, organic culture—call it Catholic, feudal, religious, tribal, or what you will.”<sup>13</sup> This, then, is the locus of the “poetic cultures” that Wright describes in the second essay, the cultures such as the one from which Nkrumah rose to power. “At the opposite end of the line, let us *imagine* another culture,” Wright continues, “such as the one in which we live”<sup>14</sup>. With this in imaginary line in place, Wright graphs a number of the most important Africana poets along it, proceeding historically from (his) “simple” to “complex.” Although this schema is deeply problematic, my point in drawing attention to it is that Wright explicitly presents it as an imaginary construct. In that light, and in conjunction with my prior observation (from *White Man, Listen!*’s first essay) that Wright rejects any notion of objectivity in general, a more sophisticated and laudable image appears. To wit, since our world for Wright is merely a collective imagining, it will be a better one to the degree that we imagine more broadly, which in turn requires the kind of pain and suffering that mark the lives of creative figures such as Nkrumah, Hughes, and Claude McKay.<sup>15</sup>

It is in the context of this imaginative spectrum of imagination that Wright offers the aforementioned hypothetical scenario of transforming the white person into a black person:

Indeed, I’d say to you here who listen to my words that I could convert any of you into Negroes, in a psychological sense, in a period of six months. That is, I could, by subjecting you to certain restrictions, hatreds, hostilities, etc., make you express yourselves as the American Negro formerly did.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps even more surprisingly, I would argue that this is not a hypothetical for Wright. Instead, it is a result that he is exhorting his white audience to help him co-create. That is, Wright is suggesting that they freely imagine him as actually performing this transformation on them as white people. To do so amounts to a process—less painful than black people’s actual experiences of discrimination and oppression but painful nonetheless—in which along with Wright they expand their moral imagination by doing what Myrdal did and what Faulkner denied his ability to do: try to imagine themselves as (psychologically undergoing the sufferings of) black people. To be clear, by “imagining themselves as black people” here, I mean imagining themselves

## The Necessary Pain of Moral Imagination

as subject to the kinds of “certain restrictions, hatreds, and hostilities” that Wright describes in the quote above.

That this is actually Wright’s intention and program is clear from his aforementioned account of Nkrumah. “To understand how they saw life,” Wright writes of leaders like Nkrumah, “you must open your minds and imagination.”<sup>17</sup> A few pages later, Wright reiterates this strategy. “What makes other men seem outlandish to us,” he complains, “is our lack of imagination.”<sup>18</sup> But with their imaginations enriched, white people could be ready to carry out the mission that Wright has delegated to them. The “greatest aid that any white Westerner can give Africa,” he explains, “is by becoming a missionary right in the heart of the Western world, explaining to his own people what they have done to Africa.”<sup>19</sup> Although proselytizing is of course a problematic concept, particularly in some of its historical and contemporary religious contexts, I would argue that Wright’s use of the term is strategic, as a creative redirecting of white Westerner’s religious missionary zeal into a secular cause in “this other world” of the black West. In short, white people must utilize their expanded moral imaginations to empower other white people to make their own, analogous expansion of moral imagination. To see how this crucial Wright-inspired mission might be accomplished, I now turn to Wright’s poems.

### II. Lonely Delegation in This Other World

The most important characteristic of Wright’s haiku, compared to other poets working in this genre, is that they are filled with political rhetoric and the subjectivity of the speaker of the poem. This is already evident in the first poem as follows:

I am nobody:  
A red sinking autumn  
Took my name away.<sup>20</sup>

One could interpret this poem as announcing Wright’s asymptotic goal for the entire collection, namely to disappear into the perfect loneliness—symbolized by namelessness—that results from having delegated the entirety of one’s privilege to others. In other words, this first poem telescopes the entire volume, showing us the final result. In his fiction, this amounts to the point at which Richard Wright as author and person loses his identity vis-à-vis the reading public by having it absorbed into his

archetype—protagonists such as “Bigger” and “Black Boy.” In short, in his fiction, Wright becomes just another anonymous young African-American male, while in these poems, he becomes the poems’ ever-shifting speaker.

In support of my politicized reading, political rhetoric comes to the fore early in the collection—a point that Wright scholar Anthony Brink also observes. In the second poem, the speaker describes giving an “order” to the sea, followed immediately by poem 3’s confident act of giving directions to the very cosmos, poem 4’s dual orders to “Sweep away the clouds” and “Give this sea a name!”, and poem 5’s giving “permission” for the very falling of the rain. I would argue that there is an intimate connection between (a) these latter moments of political rhetoric and (b) the first poem’s aforementioned treatment of identity theft. I write “theft” here because, as Brink observes below, the speaker’s name is forcefully “taken” away, as opposed to something like the name’s evanescing in a kind of nirvana. More specifically, the silver lining of the speaker’s identity being robbed is that it empowers her/him to command the cosmos. This power, though, is not without responsibility—as revealed in poem 8 in the speaker’s plea for forgiveness from a cat for “this spring rain.”

As numerous scholars have rightly insisted, this tone of power, permission, etc., is foreign to classical haiku, which approach the natural world in a detached, observing, and declarative mode—as contrasted with Wright’s dominant mode, which is the imperative.<sup>21</sup> The question arises, therefore, as to why Wright made this departure. What, in other words, does the speaker desire to accomplish with such imaginatively-assumed power? The first hint of an answer can be found in a later poem which, like poem 1, is frequently cited by critics.

Burning autumn leaves,  
I yearn to make the bonfire  
Bigger and bigger.<sup>22</sup>

The speaker’s acquired power is thus directed toward violence and destruction; perhaps connected in some way, given the dual repetition of “bigger” in the third line, to the famous protagonist of *Native Son*, “Bigger Thomas.” Contra those interpreters who see these poems as Wright’s abandonment of racism in favor of apolitical transcendence, sparks remain of Wright’s burning (albeit in quick conflagrations of seventeen syllables).

## The Necessary Pain of Moral Imagination

The next logical question, then, is “Why does the speaker desire to use this power for violence and destruction?” The answer emerges roughly 100 poems into the collection, which marks a thematic shift to the ills and injustices of the community—insofar as anger is a common reaction to suffering especially on the part of men socialized in patriarchal societies. Initially, the problems are not obviously political. If one reconsiders these images in the context of black communities historically and contemporaneous with Wright, it becomes even clearer that anger of the speaker of the poems is justified.<sup>23</sup> These poems of suffering and injustice begin with a “consumptive man,” “A drunken girl vomiting,” and a “blindman.”<sup>24</sup> This pattern is also duplicated with images from nature, beginning with “one blue glass eye,” a sunflower that “looks blankly,” and “other eyes” that “can see no more.”<sup>25</sup> Continuing this pattern in natural images, after blindness comes the emptiness of death. After “That road is empty,” one encounters a “dead girl” under a spring pond, a buzzard “not flapping its wings,” a “wounded sparrow,” icy hail that “lie[s] still” on the ground, a “dead man’s room,” “tombstones,” “death,” and “a corpse in the coffin.”<sup>26</sup> The point here is that there is a serial progression in this section of increasing human suffering which culminates in death.

As this section continues, politics comes closer to the surface by way of the same recurring rhetoric of blackness and whiteness that Wright uses to such powerful effect in his prose writings. This new pattern begins in poem 149 with: “black railroad tracks” that “bring down” white snow followed by a scarecrow “gobbling down slabs of meat”; trees that have been rendered black from “distant hills [and] / Have been bought by” the white clouds; and the “stance” of a hitchhiker that “nobody trusts.”<sup>27</sup> Again, “With indignation / A little girl spans her doll.”<sup>28</sup> And finally, from poem 172:

The scarecrow’s old hat  
Was flung by the winter wind  
Into a graveyard.

In each case, an entity that is literally black—or that occupies a position more typical of black than white people in Wright’s era—is depicted as being unjustly treated by something that is literally white or that occupies a more typical white position.

With the racial political dimension of the speakers’ anger coming closer to the surface, Wright’s next section features a chorus of several dozen reactions to these symbols of racist violence. The dominant strain in these reactions is sadness along with what might be termed a restless

preparation for revolt. Examples include: “her sad face / in its last autumn”; “long points of icicles...sharpening the wind”; “Little boys tossing / Stones at a guilty scarecrow”; blacksmiths who “hot and hard” pound “to change this cold wind” and beat “the silver moon thin”; and a crow who “opens its sharp beak / And creates a sky.”<sup>29</sup> Here the literal or figurative black figure either endures bravely the suffering or strikes back against the white injustice.

To unite these variations of melancholy revolt, Wright introduces two central themes in the form of mantras repeated throughout the collection. The first I wish to discuss is “As my delegate.” By invoking the human subject and explicitly situating the natural scene in terms of that subjectivity, this mantra would be entirely out of place in a traditional haiku. The reason is that, as an explicitly Zen Buddhist literary form, the goal of a haiku is for the poet to remove her subjectivity entirely from the composition, becoming an empty container for the natural world to inhabit and manifest itself. The “As my delegate” mantra is thus a good example of the kind of content that causes some interpreters to argue that these poems are not properly classified as haiku at all despite the poems’ superficial structural similarities with haiku.<sup>30</sup>

The first appearance of this first mantra is in poem 205, whose delegate is the “first ant of spring.” Following it are the delegates which are: the “spring wind” with “its fingers / In a young girl’s hair”; the shadow that, says the speaker, “imitates me”; and a scarecrow that “looks pensively / Into spring moonlight.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, the speakers of these poems delegate primarily quasi-persons (ants, shadows, and scarecrows) to experience the spring, touch the spring—like hair of a youth, act like the speaker, and even begin to think, respectively. Analogies can easily be found in Wright’s fiction, as for example when *Native Son*’s protagonist “Bigger Thomas”—the delegate of Wright himself—experiences youth, reaches out awkwardly to various women, and acts out in ways reminiscent of Wright’s own worst youthful behavior.<sup>32</sup>

The second and more prevalent of these two themes or mantras is the exclamation “How lonely it is!” Like “as my delegate,” this “loneliness” mantra is also highly unusual for the haiku form. In fact, it is deeply inappropriate from an orthodox perspective, as it focuses on the speaker and directly states the speaker’s feelings. What I wish to suggest is that this loneliness constitutes Wright’s poetic phenomenology of delegating to one’s deputized others whatever privilege one possesses in our anti-black

## The Necessary Pain of Moral Imagination

racist global society—which privilege is coded as “whiteness.” The phrase appears eleven times in total, and the things it describes as lonely include a “winter world full of rain,” a “valley village” “in the grip of moonlight,” and a “grate fire” which, after the speaker’s “guests have now gone,” now “burns to white ashes.”<sup>33</sup>

One can already see Wright accomplishing this delegation in his fiction and personal life; so this work in the poetry collection is merely one more incarnation of his phenomenological performance. In support of this interpretation, the OED traces the etymology of “delegate” from the Latin *lēgāre*, which means “to send with a commission, depute, commit, etc.” This etymology is also manifest in the following three (of its four) definitions for “delegate”: (1) to send or commission (a person) as a deputy or representative, with power to transact business for another; to depute or appoint to act; (3) “To assign, deliver”; and (4) “To assign (one who is debtor to oneself) to a creditor as debtor in one’s place.”<sup>34</sup>

Linger with the first of these definitions: “depute” derives from the Latin *dēputāre*, meaning “to consider as, destine, allot,” from the root *putare*, meaning “to think, count, consider.” From definition (1), therefore, one could understand Wright’s poems’ speakers as deputizing various beings in the world like a sheriff who has such a large job to do that s/he must deputize others to help her/him carry it out. Moreover, definition (3) could be applied to the committing of one’s letters to the postal carriers as delegates representing oneself as deliverers to the letters’ final destination. This also resonates with Wright’s own brief career with the U.S. Post Office, which Wright scholar Arnold Rampersad notes was the most common middle-class career for African-American Chicagoans in Wright’s era, and dramatized in Wright’s posthumously-published novel, *Lawd Today!*<sup>35</sup> Finally on this point, definition (4) could be understood in terms of the people alive today who are in a sense stand-ins for Wright: namely those to whom Wright as author has bequeathed (since he was near death when he wrote these poems) the credit for the debts owed to him by his and our racist society.

If one telescopes these elaborations on the three definitions of “delegate” from the OED, the result is the triple figure of the deputy-postal carrier-replacement debtor. And this in turn implies that the first mantra’s “loneliness” could be understood as an amalgamation of the kinds of loneliness customary for sheriffs, senders, and original debtors. That is, the speaker in one of Wright’s poems—and at a meta-level, perhaps Wright

himself—is like a sheriff who has sent away his power, giving up his right to be compensated for what his community owes him, by deputizing an indefinitely large force of deputies.

Further support for this interpretation can be found in Wright's striking line from *12 Million Black Voices*: "The law is white."<sup>36</sup> In this way, the speaker becomes like a paradigmatic white sheriff (such as John Wayne, Andy Griffith, or the Lone Ranger), increasingly replaced, due in part to increasing urbanization, by predominantly multiracial police forces especially in large cities. Just as predominantly white sheriffs have historically been forced into the lonely position of delegating their white authoritative political privilege to non-white police officers, so the speakers of Wright's poems, along with Wright himself, endure the loneliness of delegating their authoritative political privilege to the disempowered subjects of the poems including the non-human beings who constitute a majority of the earth's population. The crucial differences, however, are that Wright performs this delegating freely and does so even though he possessed far less privilege to begin with than white sheriffs in the U.S. For this reason, the loneliness for Wright resulting from the delegation of that limited privilege (*vis-à-vis* average people of color) cannot have failed to be exponentially more intense. I will now consider, as supporting evidence for my interpretation of Wright, the work of several other scholars who preceded me in accepting his lonely delegation.

### III. Listening to White People Listening

Sadly, the number of such deputies in my own home discipline of philosophy so far is vanishingly small. As for its sister-discipline of English, though there is considerable secondary scholarship on Wright (with over 1,400 entries in the MLA International Bibliography alone, and 483 on *Native Son*) only three publications are dedicated to *White Man, Listen!*. Even an anthology that considers two of the other three books collected in Wright's collection of four (entitled *Three Books from Exile*) not only leaves out *White Man, Listen!*, but also includes Wright's book *Pagan Spain* (which was written in the same year, 1957, as *White Man, Listen!*). In contrast to this limited discussion of *White Man, Listen!*, Wright's haiku have recently enjoyed some scholarly attention, most notably a 2011 anthology entitled *The Other World of Richard Wright*.

## The Necessary Pain of Moral Imagination

Beginning with the aforementioned three exceptions to the MLA neglect of *White Man, Listen!*, all three are from authors living at the edge of white European cultural empires (specifically two from South Africa and one from Turkey). Of these three scholarly studies, one focuses exclusively on South African theater and does not intersect with my concerns here. A second study, however, E. Lâle Demirtürk's "Mapping the Interstitial Spaces of 'Black' and 'Western': Richard Wright's *White Man, Listen!*" is relevant to my concerns in that it offers a summary of the latter book.<sup>37</sup>

Early on in her article, Demirtürk cites the respected Wright scholar and biographer Virginia Whatley Smith to the effect that *White Man, Listen!*'s collection of lectures-turned-essays "had a positive reception by the black American press, but was largely ignored or reproached by the white 'establishment.'"<sup>38</sup> Demirtürk asserts that Wright in that text "uses his agency to carve out an interstitial space [in Homi Bhabha's sense] within a predominantly Western social order based on the ideology of whiteness."<sup>39</sup> As a result, for Demirtürk, Wright "deconstructs the imperial configurations of selfhood" in general and also "develops a critical perspective based on the inner ambivalences of his hybrid identity" for himself in particular.<sup>40</sup> Demirtürk acknowledges that this process and its two stated results are problematic. To wit, Wright in her view "displays a typically Western attitude toward the colonized African people"—and worse—"almost interiorizes the racial conceptions of the white spectator."<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, Demirtürk still affirms how Wright, in her words, "names his location as 'black Western intellectual' and politicizes that very space." Also admirable in Wright, for Demirtürk, is his "questioning where his discursive experiences" align with his surrounding.<sup>42</sup> In other words, though burdened by his own prejudices, he at least allows his environment the opportunity to undermine them.

The last of the three MLA studies on *White Man, Listen!*, by Mikko Tuhkanen, situates Wright's text in the context of Tuhkanen's larger project on queer strategies in Wright's oeuvre.<sup>43</sup> More specifically, this article emphasizes the scene during which Wright reveals to a white English intellectual, at lunch with a black West Indian social scientist, the ultimate secret of people of color to the white English intellectual—namely, that there is no secret—thus infuriating the West Indian scientist. Tuhkanen's article is structured around the following question he asks of this Wright-narrated episode: what exactly is going on in the distinct rhetorical strategies of Wright, the West Indian scientist, and the white Englishman, respectively?

Tuhkanen's initial interpretation is that Wright unilaterally critiques deception and subterfuge (which Tuhkanen terms "queerness") on the grounds that deception/subterfuge is ultimately "self-defeating and emasculating"; and that Wright instead favors open and honest "straight talk"—which Tuhkanen terms "straightness."<sup>44</sup> Tuhkanen then concedes, however, that Wright himself engages in queer/subversive practices especially in regard to the female protagonists in his fiction—such as "Aunt Sue" from his short story "Bright and Morning Star." According to Tuhkanen, Wright's justification for this gendered exception to his own norm of "straight talk" is that he views women as able to somehow "queer and pass without losing themselves in their labyrinthine strategies"—while for men the danger is that, in Tuhkanen's words, "the game takes control of the player."<sup>45</sup>

Tuhkanen's essay later takes an abrupt turn, however, and in a way revealing that he, too, is playing the role of queer trickster. Perhaps, he argues, Wright is only pretending (queerly) to advocate straight talk. In this way, Tuhkanen takes his turn at the age-old and notoriously difficult if not impossible game of the ironic interpretation of irony. Tuhkanen finds evidence for this elsewhere in *White Man, Listen!*, for example in Wright's claim that queer tactics have in fact facilitated revolutionary violence, and even "eventually bring about the downfall of the oppressor."<sup>46</sup> What this boils down to, for Tuhkanen, is that Wright's feigned naïve call for straight talk is actually a kind of queer performance in itself. That is, straight talk from the oppressed, in the historical context of global racism, constitutes what Tuhkanen terms a new kind of queering. In short, Wright's new queering is an improvisational break from out of the racist past and into a creative new future.

Turning to the secondary literature on Wright's haiku, I begin with the two most recent contributions. First is Dean Anthony Brink's article, "Richard Wright's Search for a Counter-hegemonic Genre: The Anamorphic and Matrixial Potential of Haiku," which anticipates my own combinatorial investigation by invoking *White Man, Listen!* as well.<sup>47</sup> Beginning with the issue of form, Brink argues that "critics have projected back on Wright the aesthetic values popular in haiku today" onto "a time when haiku was still an exotic exception to English literary practices, while Wright himself projected *forward* through haiku a new approach to the form itself." Thus, while Wright "has been treated as a follower who went astray," he should instead be read as "an innovator who has been unjustly ignored for decades."<sup>48</sup>

## The Necessary Pain of Moral Imagination

In what Brink presents as support for the latter contention, he points out that Wright “tested and retested the overall composition of sequences of haiku as well as revised individual haiku before settling on his final manuscript.”<sup>49</sup> Most importantly, in Brink’s view, the final version of Wright’s poetry collection “was not published according to Wright’s intentions, with the basic order of the haiku misinterpreted by the editors of the book” forty years later, in 1998.<sup>50</sup> In fact, Wright even “painstakingly arranged his penultimate draft of the final manuscript on cardboard sheets, cutting typed haiku into strips pasted into place and then amended with new insertions and arrows drawn to indicate arrangement.”<sup>51</sup> Brink’s point appears to be that the extent of Wright’s revising indicates that his authorial vision for the haiku collection was the product of thoughtful artistic deliberation—as opposed to careless experimentation with an unfamiliar form—while any infelicity is due to editorial error.

The final and most important claim in Brink’s complex analysis is that Wright creates a new organizational matrix of anamorphic images in his haiku. By “anamorphic images,” Brink means something like distorted projections of higher quality, which he later parses as Du Bois’ “double consciousness.” More precisely, Wright’s haiku “often present allegories of social tensions transposed into personified snapshots of nature,” which Brink condenses into the phrase “political ecology.”<sup>52</sup> Brink sees Wright as having created thematic motifs from the politics of anti-racist social justice and deployed these anti-racist motifs in the form of images and concepts which are normally organized according to nature and its seasons. For example, Brink observes that the word, concept, or image of “winter” is for Wright “a symbol of hegemonic control by whites throughout the haiku,” and that in this function “winter” thereby joins other, related words (such as “snow”) to help constitute “Wright’s extensive repetitions of similar images and variations of nearly identical haiku.”<sup>53</sup> That is, through the repetition, across multiple haiku, of words such as “winter” and “snow,” Wright “establish[es] an association between anything white and oppressive hegemonic forces.”<sup>54</sup>

Brink names this strategy after the original subtitle of Wright’s poetry collection “Projections in the Haiku Manner.” Brink traces the concept of projection back to Sartre’s conception thereof, which was ultimately drawn from Nietzsche. While Nietzsche’s relationship to liberational politics remains a point of considerable controversy, it is clear that at least some Marxian thinkers utilize his work for liberating purposes.<sup>55</sup> On Brink’s reading, “projection” in Nietzsche, Sartre, and Wright “can be

understood as an active production in response to the passive reflection of social circumstance.”<sup>56</sup> In line with the political commitments of both Sartre and Wright, Brink sees Wright’s poems as Marxist. However, rather than being “programmatically or propagandistically Marxist,” Brink claims they are “spontaneously Marxist.”<sup>57</sup> Brink then elaborates on this distinction as follows: “It is certainly not activist poetry in a narrow sense, since it anamorphically allows readers who think of haiku as nature poetry to ignore the conflicts Wright is addressing.”<sup>58</sup> Brink appears to believe that the Marxism of Wright’s haiku is too subtle to function as effective Marxist propaganda—as evidenced by the near-consensus in Wright scholarship that the haiku are apolitical.

The second more recent MLA study is Sandy Alexandre’s “Culmination in Miniature: Late Style and the Essence of Richard Wright’s Haiku.”<sup>59</sup> Like Brink, Alexandre’s orientation is broadly Marxist, but in her case it is a Marxism of Adorno and the Frankfurt School rather than Brink’s Marxism of Sartre and existentialism. Alexandre argues that Wright’s haiku are paradigmatic of Adorno’s concept of “late style,” according to which an author, when near death, can become sufficiently liberated to imagine in her work an imminent utopia: in Alexandre’s words a “last-ditch fantasy.”<sup>60</sup> In Wright’s case, for Alexandre, this utopian fantasy takes the form of a vision of “universal humanism” and “ecological holism.”<sup>61</sup> It is here that *White Man, Listen!* becomes relevant, specifically in its third essay, “The Literature of the Negro in the United States.” There, as Alexandre observes, Wright prophesies that, if black writing takes “a sharp turn toward strictly racial themes,” then racism remains entrenched; whereas if black “expression broadens,” then “a human attitude prevails in America toward” black people.<sup>62</sup> For Alexandre, this is Wright’s “dream,” in a “subjunctive” mode, of “African-American literature’s obsolescence.”<sup>63</sup>

Zooming in on Wright’s haiku as the unique new medium of his late work, Alexandre sees an example of how imminent death “propels the dying artist”—and following Adorno, she means all artists here—“into a different world, thereby granting him a more farsighted perspective than, say, his hale contemporaries who may have been rendered imaginatively lax” by anticipating another day to live. In short, for Alexandre, Wright creates these late haiku “by ‘passing’—in both senses of the term”: (1) “into another world through death” and (2) “as a writer of what would seem on the face of it to be African-American literature.”<sup>64</sup>

## The Necessary Pain of Moral Imagination

In Alexandre's discussion of the secondary literature on Wright's haiku, specifically the aforementioned anthology *Richard Wright's Other World*, she agrees with several of the contributing authors that Wright's haiku constitute "therapy" for him. But Alexandre's unique reason for thinking this is that "he used this poetic form to imagine the implications of Jim Crow's abolishment for fearless African American artists such as himself."<sup>65</sup> Thus, Alexandre, like Brink, finds a politicized imagination at the center of Wright's haiku. "His haiku make world citizens out of his readers," she writes. That is, in a time when most American readers were unfamiliar with haiku (and Japanese literature generally), Wright expanded their literary horizons. "In the Andersonian vein of 'imagined communities,' Wright imagines community through a literary form."<sup>66</sup>

But Alexandre goes astray, in my view, when she describes the speaker of Wright's haiku in the following way: "Wright imagines an unidentified observer whose main concerns center on the exterior world outside of himself."<sup>67</sup> On the contrary, I would observe that Wright (a) often names the observer in the poems; (b) that observer is in some cases explicitly non-human; (c) it is not clear that the observer is not (in at least some cases) Wright himself; and (d) for a socially-conscious thinker such as Wright, everyone's concerns lie in the external world (whether we realize it or not). This first arguable misstep on Alexandre's part precedes a much more serious one, namely her unsubstantiated claim that in these poems Wright strips from the act of seeing "all its ideological bases, including race."<sup>68</sup> Counterexamples in the poems include Wright's continuing obsession with the black/white binary, in a variety of contexts.

To close my discussion of Alexandre's essay on a more affirming note, she anticipates my analysis of Wright's haiku in claiming that he "bequeaths himself to (ecological) things."<sup>69</sup> I disagree with her subsequent claim, though, namely that these ecological things are "more important than his mere mortal self" either subjectively or objectively. Thus, what Alexandre renders as Wright's knowing "how to make himself small—to become self-effacing," I would call, instead, his becoming-larger—expanding his moral imagination to the point that it encompasses even the most distant cosmic minutiae.<sup>70</sup> I agree with Alexandre, though, that Wright's becoming in this area constitutes "a lesson for the living to adopt."<sup>71</sup>

Turning to the anthology *The Other World of Richard Wright*, I will focus on just the most relevant chapter. Richard Iadonisi claims that "Wright radically reinvents the haiku form, making of it a revolutionary

poetry that offers and then savagely undercuts the possibility of Zen oneness.”<sup>72</sup> One source of evidence for Iadonisi’s thesis is that Wright wrote the haiku contemporaneously with other of his late works, all of which are explicitly anti-racist and anti-colonialist (including *White Man, Listen!*). And whereas the first three chapters in the anthology see peaceful union with nature in Wright’s poems, Iadonisi instead sees “disjunction between self and nature.”<sup>73</sup> In support of his reading, Iadonisi offers close and insightful readings of individual poems, including poem 5:

I give permission  
For this slow spring rain to soak  
The violet beds.

This rhetoric of “giving,” Iadonisi notes (like the rhetoric of “ordering” and “granting” from poems 2 and 14, respectively), suggests that the poems’ “speaker seems more at odds than at ease with his surroundings as he is ‘giving’ something that he does not really own to begin with.”<sup>74</sup> Iadonisi then connects this speaker/surroundings disjunction to J. L. Austin’s concept of “speech acts,” specifically by inventing a new category of speech acts not present in Austin’s own classification. Iadonisi describes the poems’ speech acts as “mock gestures” that suggest—“simply yet elegantly”—to Wright’s “predominantly white audience” that “control is illusory.”<sup>75</sup>

A second source of evidence lies in Iadonisi’s reinterpretations of prior, apolitical interpretations of specific haiku, revealing layers invisible without a political lens. Examples of said revelations include (a) the exploitation suggested in poem 459’s oft-quoted idea of the speaker paying rent for the moonlight and lice in his room, (b) the aesthetic self-loathing of black people in poem 455’s green cockleburs in a boy’s woolly hair, and (c) the implication of a “dominant ‘snow-white’ society” in poem 609’s black sweepers’ being “absorbed by flakes.”<sup>76</sup>

The final source of evidence in Iadonisi’s reading is found at a meta-level, in an anchoring of Iadonisi’s antagonistic approach in Wright’s own thought. To begin, and to return to *White Man, Listen!*, Iadonisi quotes Wright as follows: “The imperialistic influence” of the West on the East “is, in large part, discursive, as the linguistic designation ‘savage’ implies.”<sup>77</sup> In this context, Iadonisi then quotes Abdul R. JanMohammed to the effect that Wright uses his poems to “reflect the negation back at the hegemony.”<sup>78</sup> In short, Iadonisi concludes, “like Bigger’s dreamed-of-airplane” in *Native Son*, “Wright loads his haiku with linguistic ‘bombs’ that he drops to remind his readers of social inequalities.”<sup>79</sup> Though Bigger’s airplane dream

## The Necessary Pain of Moral Imagination

represented a nondestructive alternative to the destructive actuality of his life, and thus clashes with Iadonisi's destructive image of bombs, they share the imagination of a more socially just future.

### IV. Conclusion: Deputizing the Lonely Delegation of White Privilege

Two themes resound from the secondary literature in the previous section. First, Wright's authorial strategies in *White Man Listen!* and *This Other World* are complex and multilayered, including irony and queering, which complicate the genres deployed in those texts. And second, as a result of these strategic complications, his writing in even as traditionally anti-political a genre as haiku manifests a broadly Marxian critique and advocacy for racial justice. Against this background, one can more easily see how *This Other World* and *White Man, Listen!* might be meaningfully connected, namely by recognizing the former's theme of lonely delegation as precisely the point of the latter text. That is, the titular "Listen!" is not, as some critics have argued, primarily a plea or a wish. It is the Austinian speech act of deputizing. With this act, Wright is appointing his intended audience of white readers as his deputies. He is altruistically discharging his power to white people so that they might extend past his death his life's work—part of which was to expand the moral imagination of white communities within larger communities the world over.

Admittedly, the idea of hierarchy per se, as implied by the relationship between sheriffs and deputies, is potentially problematic with regard to promoting the kind of democratic freedom associated with racial justice. It is worth noting, however, that the specific hierarchy of deputizing does not involve exploitation or coercion, insofar as the potential deputy is not forced to exercise the conferred power. Instead, the deputy is merely required, should s/he choose to exert that power, to exert it under the guiding authority of the sheriff. In other words, the sheriff is merely offering to outsource her power to the deputy, who has the option to refuse to exercise that power, on the condition that s/he will not exert it independently of her oversight. In the case of racial justice, it seems clear that this is a beneficial rather than unjust arrangement. Consider the contrast case, in which white people attempt to promote racial justice by channeling the perspective of people of color without accepting the guidance of, and responsibility to, those people of color. That arrangement is both problematic, and unfortunately common.

The power of Wright's poems from this perspective is that their lonely delegations makes vivid the painful cost of this crucial work, the unavoidable pain that Wright chose to endure, and the comparatively miniscule amount of pain that white people should choose to endure if they choose to accept this crucial deputizing. I would urge my fellow white people to be Wright's peacemakers, the keepers of the peace in majority-white communities, in the noble spirit of peacemaking to which actual law enforcement has tragically and unjustly failed to rise for a majority of African-Americans. And the white people from those communities must pay the political debt which white people globally owe, in truth, to Wright himself.

Though this link between Wright's texts and global racial justice might seem a reach, I would ask the reader to recall Wright's aforementioned claim about white Westerners becoming "missionaries" to the West. Initially addressed to one live audience of predominantly white Europeans, the speech's publication in *White Man, Listen!* enabled it to reach his white audience worldwide. Clearly, and especially in terms of political economics, the West continues to exert a massive influence on racial injustice, and there is much that Westerners could do to help empower racial justice instead.

I now conclude with poem 382, exhorting my white readers to join me in accepting Wright's deputizing. Please, help us—black, white, and beyond—to extend his lonely delegating sacrifice, by performing further lonely delegations of your own privilege, as the present essay has attempted to do with that of its author, in the pursuit of global racial justice.

A valley village  
Lies in the grip of moonlight:  
How lonely it is.

## The Necessary Pain of Moral Imagination

### Notes

- 1 Richard Wright, *Black Power: Three Books from Exile: Black Power; The Color Curtain; and White Man, Listen!* (New York: Harper, 2008).
- 2 Richard Wright, *Haiku: The Last Poems of an American Icon* (New York: Arcade, 2012).
- 3 Wright 2008, 772.
- 4 Ibid 660.
- 5 This contractedness of the imagination is not limited to white Westerners, according to Wright. He describes the irony of how Gandhi, by trying to resist Britain's attempted industrialization of India, thereby set that industrialization in motion. In this effort, according to Wright, "Gandhi was dealing with processes that far outstripped his own imagination" (Wright 2008, 691).
- 6 Wright 2008, 710.
- 7 Ibid 718.
- 8 Ibid 719.
- 9 Ibid 719.
- 10 Ibid 653.
- 11 Ibid 670, 671.
- 12 Ibid 703.
- 13 Ibid 734, emphasis added.
- 14 Ibid 734, emphasis added.
- 15 Ibid 766, 763.
- 16 Ibid 772.
- 17 Ibid 787.
- 18 Ibid 795.

19 Ibid 809.

20 Wright 2012, poem 1.

21 This point is made by numerous contributors to *The Other World of Richard Wright: Perspectives on His Haiku*, ed. Jianqing Zheng (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011).

22 Wright 2012, poem 49.

23 My claim that the speaker's anger is justified might appear counterintuitive given my above invocation of Nietzsche, since he is often interpreted as a relativist. I, however, interpret Nietzsche as a perspectivalist, the relevant difference from a relativist being an emphasis on perspectives rather than perceivers and a consequent potential for a hierarchy of perspectives with, for example, the most expansive being the best. In this light, there is arguably an overlap between Nietzsche's work and the social justice advocacy of the Marxian school of standpoint epistemology theory. For more, see Joshua M. Hall, "Toward a New Conception of Socially-Just Peace," *Peace, Culture and Violence* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); and Joshua M. Hall, "Slanted Truths: *The Gay Science* as Nietzsche's *Ars Poetica*," *Evental Aesthetics* 5(1): 2016, 98-117.

24 Wright 2012, poems 121, 123, 127.

25 Ibid, poems 124, 125, 128.

26 Ibid, poems 126, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 148, 152.

27 Ibid, poems 150, 151, 154.

28 Ibid, poem 171.

29 Ibid, poems 186, 187, 191, 195, 197, 200.

30 See, for example, Tukhanen's discussion of this issue below.

31 Wright 2012, poems 209, 532, 684.

32 See Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 11.

## The Necessary Pain of Moral Imagination

- 33 Wright 2012, poems 319, 322, 382, 491, 498, 569, 574, 584, 608, 636, 770.
- 34 “delegate, n.” OED Online. January 2018. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.qbcc.ezproxy.cuny.edu/view/Entry/49311?rskey=GGH1zJ&result=1> (accessed February 22, 2018).
- 35 Richard Wright, *Lawd Today!*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993).
- 36 Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Basic, 2008), 44.
- 37 Virginia Whatley Smith, “‘French West Africa’: Behind the Scenes with Richard Wright, the Travel Writer.” *Richard Wright’s Travel Writings: New Reflections*, ed. Virginia Whatley Smith (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 190-191, quoted on page 46 of E. Lâle Demirtürk’s “Mapping the Interstitial Spaces of ‘Black’ and ‘Western’: Richard Wright’s *White Man, Listen!*” *CLA Journal* 49(1): 2005, 45-55.
- 38 Virginia Whatley Smith, “‘French West Africa’: Behind the Scenes with Richard Wright, the Travel Writer.” *Richard Wright’s Travel Writings: New Reflections*, ed. Virginia Whatley Smith (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 190-191.
- 39 Demirtürk, 46.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 47, 49.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 52.
- 43 Mikko Tuhkanen, “Queer Guerrillas: On Richard Wright’s and Frantz Fanon’s Dissembling Revolutionaries,” *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Cultures* 61(4): 2008, 615-642.
- 44 Tuhkanen, 616.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 625.
- 46 Wright, 21, quoted in Tuhkanen 634.

- 47 Dean Anthony Brink, "Richard Wright's Search for a Counter-hegemonic Genre: The Anamorphic and Matrixial Potential of Haiku," *Textual Practice* 28(6): 2014, 1077-1102, 1097.
- 48 Brink, 1078.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Ibid., 1078, 1079.
- 51 Ibid., 1080.
- 52 Ibid., 1080, 1088.
- 53 Ibid., 1083.
- 54 Ibid., 1091.
- 55 For a critical assessment, see Geoff Waite's *Nietzsche's Corps/e*; and for a positive assessment, see Gilles Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Geoff Waite, *Nietzsche's Corps/e*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1966; Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson New York: Columbia, 1983.
- 56 Brink, 1082.
- 57 Ibid., 1087.
- 58 Ibid., 1094.
- 59 Sandy Alexandre, "Culmination in Miniature: Late Style and the Essence of Richard Wright's Haiku," in *Richard Wright in a Post-Racial Imaginary*, ed. Alice Mikal Craven and William E. Dow (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 245-262.
- 60 Alexandre, 246.
- 61 Ibid., 247.
- 62 Wright, 105, quoted in Alexandre, 247.
- 63 Alexandre, 247.
- 64 Ibid., 248.

## The Necessary Pain of Moral Imagination

65 Ibid., 249.

66 Anderson, 6, quoted in Alexandre, 249.

67 Alexandre, 251.

68 Ibid., 252.

69 Ibid 256.

70 Ibid., 256.

71 Ibid., 257.

72 Richard A. Iadonisi, “‘I am Nobody’: The Haiku of Richard Wright,” *The Other World of Richard Wright: Perspectives on His Haiku*, ed. Jianqing Zheng (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 71-92, 71.

73 Ibid., 76.

74 Ibid., 78.

75 Wright, 82, 87, 88. As I noted above, Brink also makes this connection in Wright between the image of snow and the theme of white oppression (Brink 79).

76 Brink also makes this connection about the snow and white oppression. Brink, 1096.

77 Wright 103, quoted in Iadonisi, 84.

78 Abdul R. JanMohamed, “Negating the Negation as a Form of Affirmation in Minority Discourse: The Construction of Richard Wright as Subject,” *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, ed. Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 104, quoted in Iadonisi, 84.

79 Iadonisi 88.

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## The Necessary Pain of Moral Imagination

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