"The Cosmopolitan Outsider: Richard Wright's Fraught Internationalism in *The Color Curtain*."

I. Introduction

I'd like to begin by thanking Sunny, Marina, and Julius for their hard work in organizing a wonderful conference that has made possible very productive conversations. Like Laura and Omari, my paper similarly deals with belonging and an individual's often fraught relationship to a "home," particularly when that those in that broadly conceived "home" do not want you. I ask the question—whether by choice or against one's will—can one ever really leave one's home? That is, can you ever really be ungrounded or unmoored from your place of origin? Or do you inevitably carry aspects of it—both good and bad—with you when you leave?

My paper examines these questions with respect to the African American author Richard Wright's tense relationship with the U.S. The 1950s was a time of profound social upheaval not only in domestically as racial inequality was debated, but also worldwide in the aftermath of WW2 and decolonization. In order to win favor with formerly colonized nations, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union seized upon the deplorable state of American black-white race relations in order to repudiate the ostensibly 'liberal' ideals underpinning American democracy (Dudziak 12). As American political elites realized that the country's troubling history of racial discrimination was impeding its foreign policy objectives, they retaliated with their own public relations campaign and strategically advanced significant civil rights legislation ordering the desegregation of schools and public accommodations as well as equal housing rights for American blacks (Dudziak 49; 106).

During this period, African American writers were in a unique position to observe these events from both the domestic and the international perspectives. Richard Wright is a particularly interesting figure to examine with respect to these issues. Drawing upon his own experiences as a

native Southerner, as well as a resident of Chicago and New York later in life, Wright's works consistently demonstrate an incisive understanding of the necessarily fraught nature of the American black male at this time. Significantly, Wright's perspective was not only American, but also *cosmopolitan* as he left the United States permanently in 1947 for France. Although some critics[1] would later insist that Wright's exile to France blunted his usually sharp focus on American race relations, as demonstrated in the masterpieces *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945), it rather seems that Wright's self-imposed exile to Europe afforded him with a unique vantage point from which to forge connections between the nature of racism in the U.S. and racism on a global level.[2]

In contrast to his fictional works in which his male protagonists often embody an "outsider" position within American society, in *The Color Curtain*, Wright himself occupies a fraught 'insider/outsider' status as he travels to the Bandung Conference, the momentous gathering of twenty-nine formerly colonized 'colored' nations in Indonesia in 1955. Interestingly, though *The Color Curtain* demonstrates Wright's generally broad comprehension of the black and colonized psyche, that is, the affective ties of race, religion, and the colonized experience that brought these nations together, he nonetheless espouses a problematic neo-colonialist solution for them—Westernization and attendant modernization. Indeed, despite his much touted 'outsider' position, Wright's advancement of this Western position ironically demonstrates the insidious nature of modern colored and postcolonial identity, behind which the West is always, already, a lurking presence. Accordingly, alongside Wright's fictional works,

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[1] In Lorraine Hansberry's review of *The Outsider* for *Freedom* in April 1953, she writes: "…Richard Wright has been away from home for a long time. He has forgotten which of the streets of the Southside lie south of others, an insignificant error, except that it points up how much he has forgotten other things" (Butler 109).

[2] Paul Gilroy identifies Wright's broadening racial awareness in his study *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. As he observes, "The relationship of 'The Negro' to western civilization was something that exercised [Richard Wright] greatly, particularly during the last years of his life" (147).

The Color Curtain can be read as an existentialist text precisely because of its examination of the necessarily fraught positioning of the modern black or colored individual for whom the achievement of an authentic personal identity—free of any "Western" influence and its pernicious effects—is impossible.

II. Wright's Exilic Position

Richard Wright's decision in 1947 to leave the United States permanently for France may be viewed as the culmination of several journeys to find respite from American racism and its insidious effects. After moving continuously within the South during his turbulent childhood, Wright eventually relocated to Chicago in 1927 and later to New York City in 1937. As he related in 1944: "I had spent a third of my life traveling from the place of my birth to the North just to talk freely, to escape the pressure of fear" (137). However, as his 1951 essay "I Choose Exile" reveals, these domestic migrations did not provide Wright the freedom he desired. In the essay, the author critiques the hypocrisy of the American liberal ideals of freedom and rights by recounting his inability to purchase a house. As was then common for American blacks, though Wright had enough money to purchase the house he desired, he eventually discovered that "the white owner did not want to sell his house to a Negro" (291).[3] Wright's critique of American 'freedom' continues as he recalls the immense difficulty he experienced in obtaining a passport, which he was ultimately able to get only after "pull[ing] every political string in sight" (292).[4]

[3] Housing discrimination and racially restrictive covenants were pervasive problems throughout the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. Wright's experience demonstrates that such discrimination was widespread throughout the United States, even for affluent and prominent African Americans; it was not until 1948 that the Supreme Court ruled in *Shelley v. Kraemer* that racially restrictive covenants were not enforceable.

[4] Indeed, that Wright experienced difficulty in travelling abroad at this time is not surprising. As Mary Dudziak observes, since the U.S. was in the midst of repairing its international political image at this time, the federal government was particularly vigilant regarding the travel of African Americans, who were likely to smear the U.S. race image abroad (61). In the early 1950s, Paul Robeson and W.E.B. DuBois experienced similar obstacles.

When considering the hurdles he faced in leaving the U.S., Wright sarcastically remarks upon the incongruous 'welcome' that he received upon arriving in Paris. Recalling that he was met by a U.S. Embassy official as well as "two sleek cars," Wright ironically observes [**SLIDE**], **"I found that abroad the United States Government finds it convenient to admit that even Negroes are Americans (Read between the lines!)"** Here the author is profoundly aware of the truth that he only just narrowly 'escaped' America, which this meaningless, friendly 'welcome' from the U.S. Embassy belies. Indeed, Wright's arrival in Paris demonstrates the sheer irony of the oppression of African Americans in the United States, for not only is he repressed within his own country, but attempts to depart it are similarly stifled. As a result, such experiences uniquely qualify the African American man, in this instance Wright himself, to understand and appreciate "authentic" freedom (289).

Importantly, France is valued not only for the respite it offers from American racism, but also for the openness and liberal nature of Parisian society specifically. Wright readily observes that Parisians are "a civilized people" who do not make distinctions on the basis of skin color. In contrast to Americans who, for Wright, were "uncivilized and insecure," it was "the love and respect which Frenchmen held toward their own history, culture, and achievements that braced the French to a stance of fairness in racial matters" (293-293). Thus, when the author decides to purchase a home, in contrast to his experience in the United States, he observes that "not once during my goings and comings did I so much as observe the lift of an eyelid at the color of my skin" (293). Wright readily lauds the freedom he has encountered in French society: **"…I tell you frankly there is more freedom in one square block of Paris than there is in the entire United States of America!"** (289). Though overly romantic and sensationalist, Wright's

effusive praise of Parisian society and the freedom it provides him is significant for it explains his decision that "barring war or catastrophe, I intend to remain in exile" (ibid).

Importantly, rather than dilute his understanding of the African American experience as some later reviewers of Wright's work suggested, the social and aesthetic freedom of Paris provided the author with a unique, coveted space from which to continue his thoughtful interrogations on race. Indeed, the hybridity of Wright's new position as both American ***and*** European—and his consequent knowledge about the respective oppression and freedom within both societies—enriched his subsequent writing on the subject. In an interview with *Ebony* magazine in July 1953, Wright states (**SLIDE**):

> **The break from the U.S. was more than a geographical change. It was a break with my former attitudes as a Negro and a Communist—an attempt to think over and redefine my attitudes and my thinking. I was trying to grapple with the big problem—the problem and meaning of Western civilization as a whole and the relation of Negroes and other minority groups to it. (qtd. in Gilroy 165)**

As noted here, Wright's exile to Europe resulted in a significant psychic rupture that enabled him to place his previous American-focused writings in a larger, global context in which new meaningful connections could be made. Specifically, Wright alludes to his growing contemplation of the universal predicament of colored minorities vis-à-vis the West. That is, through Wright's newfound distance and freedom from America, he became better equipped to reflect upon phenomena both within and outside of it.

It was precisely this unique position of hybridity that enabled Wright to incisively comprehend the many problems facing the formerly colonized nations that attended the Bandung Conference in 1955. Indeed, within *The Color Curtain* one witnesses Wright's understanding of race expand as he attempts to link the oppression of the American Negro to that of the formerly colonized, 'colored' peoples throughout the world. **However**, despite Wright's cosmopolitanism that enables him to understand the innate inferiority of the colonized towards the West, he

nevertheless conveys a problematic Western mindset by suggesting that Westernization is the appropriate solution for these nations to overcome their retarding reliance upon religious and racial thinking. Significantly, through the espousal of such a position, Wright reiterates a message conveyed in his fictional work of the period—the necessarily overdetermined nature of the colored individual or nation for whom Western ideology is 'always already' functioning.

Reminiscent of his stance in "I Choose Exile," Wright begins *The Color Curtain* by emphasizing how his particular subjectivity uniquely qualifies him to be able to forge connections and mutual understandings with the Bandung participants (**SLIDE**):

> "…I feel that my life has given me some keys to what [these nations] would said say or do. I'm an American Negro; as such, I've had a burden of race consciousness. So have these people. I worked in my youth as a common laborer, and I've a class consciousness. So have these people….I saw and observed religion in my childhood; and these people are religious. I was a member of the Communist Party for twelve years and I know something of the politics and psychology of rebellion. These people have had as their daily experience such politics…I want to use these emotions to try to find out what these people think and feel and why." (440-441).

As scholars such as Eve Dunbar and Paul Gilroy have observed, despite Wright's exile, the author did not wish to—nor in fact did he—abandon his identity as an American Negro. Rather, as Wright relates here, he wished to juxtapose his experience with those of other marginalized figures in order to understand how racism—and colonialism more broadly—were universal phenomena. As Gilroy notes, "In Wright's mature position, the Negro is no longer just America's metaphor but rather a central symbol in the psychological, cultural, and political systems of the West as a whole" (159). That is, for Wright, the American Negro experience was but a manifestation of a larger global phenomenon of racism and colonialism that he sought to deconstruct.

Before leaving for Bandung, Wright engaged in a series of interviews with Westernized Asians whom he thought could teach him "basic Asian attitudes" (445). He discovers that though

he could relate to them on one level, there was nonetheless a profound chasm of experiences and views separating them (**SLIDE**):

> I found that many Asians hated the West with an absoluteness that no American Negro could ever muster. The American Negro's reactions were limited, partial, centered, as they were, upon specific complaints; he rarely ever criticized or condemned the conditions of life about him as a whole…Once his particular grievances were redressed, the Negro reverted to a normal Western outlook. The Asian, however, had been taken from his own culture before he had embraced or had pretended to embrace Western culture… (449)

Significantly, though Wright perceives that Asians also possess a 'double consciousness' like the American Negro, the perspectives of Asians are far more virulent. For Wright, in contrast to the American Negro who fights for his rights ***within*** **a** Western context which is ostensibly yet problematically his '**home'**,[5] Asians have no actual connection to Western culture, which arrived uninvited to colonize their nations and caused deep systemic problems as a result.

As a result of this thorny relationship to the West, it is not at all surprising how Asian countries cling to their own culture and ideas of a pre-colonial past (487). As Wright comments with dismay, the Asian and African nations at Bandung are problematically constrained by race and religion, which he perceives as restrictive bonds that sadly show no signs of abating. Wright observes (**SLIDE**):

> Thus, a racial consciousness, evoked by the attitudes and practices of the West, had slowly blended with a defensive religious feeling; here, in Bandung, the two had combined into one: *a racial and religious system of identification manifesting itself in an emotional nationalism which was now leaping state boundaries and melting and merging, one into the other*. (emphasis in original; 542)

> Since all progress and social change are measured in terms of the degree to which Asian and African countries resemble Western countries, each tiny **alteration** wrought in the traditional and customary habits of the people evoke in them feelings of race consciousness. (584)

[5] Admittedly Wright's understanding of Negro black culture is quite tainted by his own views. One could indeed 'go further back' than he does to consider slavery and the loss of native African culture. Indeed, this elision further betrays Wright's staunchly Western perspective.

Interestingly, despite understanding the culpability of the West in the rise of race and religion as potent social forces in these countries, here Wright nonetheless betrays a problematic Western mindset as he deems these legacies retardants to these countries' advancement. For example, he observes that in Indonesia "the fear of the West is so great" that its inhabitants eschew Western technology, and accordingly, stymie their own ability to progress deliberately (519). This assessment is indeed ironic as Wright himself seems elsewhere to have understood colonialism's effects of instigating the rise of religion and race as triumphant markers of a distinguished identity in contradistinction to that of their "white invaders" (487) Specifially, when comparing the complicated morass of issues that Asia and Africa bear vis-à-vis the West, Wright understandably states that the "Negro Problem" of America has not been brought up at Bandung because it is mere "child's play" (574).

Consonant with his Western perspective, Wright also readily identifies with various leaders of the Bandung Conference **whom** he thought espoused a similar outlook regarding the overarching problem of the East's fundamental relationship to the West. For example, Wright is taken with Indonesian President Kusno Sukarno's attempt to manipulate the fraught legacies of race and religion into a collective unifying force for the East (541). Wright also looks favorably upon Filipino Diplomat Carlos Romulo, who, like the author, desires the Bandung countries to mimic the 'good' and not the 'bad' of the West. Like Wright, who was dismayed with his own experience of preferential treatment at Bandung (519), Romulo was similarly fearful of the consequences of the internalization and reenactment of Western racism: "It is one of our heaviest responsibilities, we of Asia and Africa, not to fall ourselves into the racist trap" (551). Romulo goes on to encourage the nations to temper their frustration with the West with the benefits it has provided: "…just as Western political thought has given us all so many of our basic ideas of

political freedom, justice, and equity, it is Western science which in this generation has exploded the mythology of race…" (552). Indeed, through such statements Romulo demonstrates a broad, progressive perspective which Wright himself holds and advocates.

But perhaps the figure Wright that most admired at Bandung was Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, with whom he also shared many views. Both men similarly detested Communism's tyrannical and oppressive methods and Wright was impressed with Nehru's political ken in coaxing Communist Chinese Prime Minister Chou En-Lai to come to Bandung (552). As Wright astutely perceives, this was certainly a strategic move on the part of Nehru, who realized that his role as a prominent player in Asia could only be bolstered by making an indirect alliance with "Red China" due to the implicit unity and power that such an alliance would demonstrate to the rest of the world (562). Indeed, Nehru's hybridity as "part East, part West" and his consequent recognition of the essential balance between these poles strongly appealed to Wright (ibid). He is accordingly impressed with the results of Nehru's diplomatic maneuvers; rather than espousing Communist ideas as the world feared, Prime Minister Chou En-Lai is suave and conciliatory at Bandung, which as Wright interprets correctly, was a tactical countermove to curry favor with the new African and Asian leaders: "Trying for an alliance along the broadest possible lines, the Colombo Powers asked Chou En-lai to come in and behave. And Chou, being no fool, said yes" (563).

But as Wright himself observes, how could Communism even presume to pose a threat to a gathering of intensely religious nations? As he astutely explains, it was not the appeal of Communism itself but rather the desperation of the alienated, confused nations that made the ideology attractive: "They felt that they were acting in common defense of themselves" (563). As Wright had earlier pointed out, the African and Asian espousal of religion was largely due to

the desire to retain and protect what was one's own and could be distinguished from the "white invader" (487). Accordingly, these nations' desperation for purpose and direction—combined with religion's fundamental inability to provide any effective recourse—made them particularly susceptible to Communism.

When considering Wright's incisive understanding of the many complex problems centered upon the tense relationship between East and West presented at Bandung, it seems strange that the author ends his text by repeating his advocacy of continued Westernization—via secular modernity and technology—as the 'solution' for the Bandung nations. Linked to his distaste of the ubiquitous presence of racial and religious hierarchies within Asia, Wright ruminates on this on several occasions within *The Color Curtain* (**SLIDE**):

> "…civilization itself is based on the right to interfere. We start interfering with a baby as soon as it is born. Education is interference. I think that you have a right to interfere, if you feel that the assumptions of your interference are sound." (601)

> "Is this secular, rational base of thought and feeling in the Western world broad and secure enough to warrant the West's assuming the moral right to interfere *sans* narrow, selfish political motives? My answer is, Yes. And not only do I believe that this is true, but I feel that such a secular and rational basis of thought and feeling, shaky and delicate as yet, exists also in the elite of Asia and Africa!...[the] two bases of Eastern and Western rationalism must become one! And quickly, or else the tenuous Asian-African secular, rational attitudes will become flooded, drowned in irrational tides of racial and religious passions" (607)

Wright's comments, prophetic for today, are troubling precisely because they reveal the limitations of his cosmopolitan position. Aligning himself with Asian elites like Nehru, Wright finds that colonialism's sharpening of racial and religious ideology has been a profound disservice to Asian and African nations. Yet, despite his understanding of the problematic origin of these ideas, Wright himself adopts a neo-colonialist perspective by advancing their continuing Westernization/modernization as an effective recourse. While Wright qualifies the "West's moral right to interfere" as an ideal merging of both "Eastern and Western rationalism," his proposal is nonetheless naïve, for when has Western inference ***ever*** been without "narrow, selfish

political motives"? Through such declarations, Wright certainly betrays the necessarily fraught and potent nature of his Western mindset, which, despite his cosmopolitan location and approach, is demonstrably not easy to escape.

Indeed, though Wright's exile enabled him to experience what he deemed to be authentic freedom, and to better understand the similarities between the repressed black American man and the repressed postcolonial man generally, one finds Wright's cosmopolitan perspective in *The Color Curtain* uneven and limited. Certainly, despite his claims in his 1957 nonfictional text *White Man, Listen!* (647), he had not yet truly become cosmopolitan and "rootless." Rather, as discussed here, despite his touted cosmopolitan stance, it appears that Wright was only able to escape Western ideology to a certain degree, for though he was able to elude the hegemonic Western construct of race, he did not elude the construct of Westernized progress, a limitation which testifies to the profound difficulty, if not impossibility, of shedding even highly flawed inherited ideological conceptions. Thus, though Wright takes pride in believing he has left America, we find that, for him, home was actually very hard to leave behind.