

ESSAY

Richard Wright and the Literary Popular Front: Progressive Interwar Writers, Antiracist Nationalism, and the Cold War Birth of World Literature

ERIC STRAND

“We had only to speak and millions listened,” Richard Wright enthused in the early 1940s in his autobiography, *Black Boy*. “Our writing was translated into French, German, Russian, Chinese, Spanish, Japanese. . . . Who had ever, in all human history, offered to young writers an audience so vast?” (328). Wright describes the exhilaration he felt at the 1934 John Reed Club congress in Chicago, a meeting of leftist writers organized by the American Communist Party (CP), which supported the budding career of an impoverished Black writer from segregated Mississippi. Wright often experienced tension with the CP, which he perceived as restricting artistic expression. Yet his statement commemorates an international left-liberal continuum of literary activism at a time when writers felt directly connected to social movements and government policies and “wrote what [they] felt” regarding a “revolutionary and changing world” (328).

Wright’s oeuvre poses the vexed question of whether world literature can ever escape being “World Lit,” which “bolsters neoliberal pluralism” and endorses “translatability as a sign of global currency” (Apter, “Untranslatability” 195). Wright would no doubt agree with Emily Apter’s criticism of neoliberal capitalism in her provocatively titled *Against World Literature*. Yet his statements in *Black Boy* also support David Damrosch’s argument that a work becomes world literature “by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin” (*What* 6). Can we imagine progressive

ERIC STRAND is writing “The Black New Deal: African Americans Rewrite the Welfare State,” from which this essay is taken. His work has also appeared in *English Literary History*, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, and *Studies in Romanticism*.

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modes of circulation and translation? To study Wright's oeuvre, and its later influence on postwar anticolonial movements, is to historicize the contemporary discipline of world literature itself, which is influenced by a Cold War paradigm that sought to discredit this earlier progressive model.

I begin by arguing that Wright was the standard-bearer of an alternative model of world literature, which, to avoid conceptual confusion, I will call a literary Popular Front that was influenced by Moscow and centered in 1930s Paris. Critics who label Wright a social realist overlook his modernist elements as well as his admiration for André Malraux, whose novels provided an ideological lingua franca for interwar writers. In Wright's imagination, the Black and white leftists of *Native Son* (1940) geographically confined to Chicago's streets are nonetheless allied with the existentialist rebels of Malraux's *Man's Fate* (1934). Yet *Native Son* also addresses a failing in much contemporary world literature theory: instead of seeing the nation-state as a homogenizing force to be escaped, Wright wanted to bring an antiracist nationalism to American letters, a core of what Franco Moretti calls the "world literary system" ("Conjectures" 157).

After World War II, the literary Popular Front might seem to have been erased by America's growing security state as well as by the rightward turn of many cultural figures, including Malraux. However, Wright continued his cultural politics abroad, forming the Franco-American Fellowship (FAF) in order to help France resist the "cultural Cold War," engineered by the CIA to assimilate leftist European intellectuals to a project of anticommunist American hegemony (Saunders 3). His novel *The Outsider* (1953) not only brings a Black leftist perspective to the 1950s Paris arts scene but also reveals that much world literature criticism, such as Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*, is informed by a residual Cold War politics that prizes an avant-garde formal autonomy. In contrast, Wright enabled a network of antiracist Black writers and politicized young expatriates, including James Baldwin, despite the ostensible rivalry between Wright and Baldwin.

Yet Wright's greatest influence was on what Rossen Djagalov calls the "Third World Republic

of Letters," a generation of decolonizing Asian and African writers (219). Ironically, this extension of the literary Popular Front bypassed Wright himself, who adopted an American exceptionalist stance that drew on the rhetoric of the New Deal and Popular Front era but discarded this era's ideals. However, his early writing gained new life through leftist channels of circulation and through the work of progressive translators like Marcel Duhamel, becoming a major influence on anticolonial Asian and African novelists like Indonesia's Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Senegal's Ousmane Sembène. Reading Frantz Fanon's famous essay "On National Culture" as an intervention in literary studies, I show how *Native Son* informed the Popular Front sensibility of *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). This alternative model of world literature, which extolls progressive nationalism instead of the global market, is not anachronistic but vital for our own century of social inequality and racial conflict.

I.

As Katerina Clark points out, contemporary discussions of "world literature," which invoke Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Karl Marx as intellectual precedents, seem unaware that the term was also central for leftist intellectuals in the 1930s (4). The interwar literary movements identified in recent scholarship—such as the Black international (Edwards), anti-imperialist modernism (Balthaser), and the Soviet republic of letters (Djagalov)—might serve as alternatives to the world literature models of our own time, which are inseparable from neoliberal globalization (Rubin). Although they often wrote of proletarian life, these interwar writers were not strictly committed to realist techniques; for Michael Denning, Wright is representative of a "novelists' international" that was "deeply influenced by the experimental modernisms of the early decades of the century" (*Culture* 52). This essay uses the term *literary Popular Front* for this leftist, interwar world literature—partly for generic flexibility, but more importantly to highlight interracial alliances and the activist state. Bruce Robbins remarks pithily that "what world literature seeks

and values is anything and everything that is not the nation-state" (198). Models of literary internationals often make this same mistake. For Wright, there was no contradiction involved in drawing inspiration from transnational movements and imagining an antiracist welfare state.

Langston Hughes dubbed Wright "The Negro Gorky," a moniker that indicates his transnational dimension (qtd. in Wald, *Exiles* 91). Often stereotyped as a vulgar realist, Maxim Gorky founded the World Literature Publishing House after the Bolshevik Revolution (Khotimsky). While this particular venture was short-lived, Gorky was representative of a Soviet internationalism that was hospitable to modernist writers, running counter to the cultural insularity associated with 1930s Stalinism (Clark 139). In Chicago, Wright was a contributor to Moscow-based journals like *International Literature*, which published English, French, and Russian editions; the latter published a Russian translation of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). Wright merged Gorkian realism and Joycean modernism in his early collection of novellas, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1940). *Bright and Morning Star* is indebted to Gorky's *Mother* (1906) for its portrait of a female Black activist, Aunt Sue, who tries to protect her communist son from the racist authorities of a Southern town. Yet Wright also gives the martyred Aunt Sue a send-off that parallels Gabriel Conroy's homage to Michael Furey in Joyce's "The Dead."¹ This invocation of Joyce might seem incongruous, but it is illustrative of Popular Front writers' repurposing of supposedly apolitical modernist writers to leftist ends.

Nevertheless, the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, at which the official Karl Radek denounced Joyce's work as a "heap of dung crawling with worms," threatened to set strictures on creative expression (qtd. in Todd 145). Later in the decade, the Great Purge and the Nazi-Soviet Pact caused Moscow to lose its luster in comparison with Paris. Concerned to distinguish themselves from the blood-and-soil rhetoric of their fascist rivals, progressive French intellectuals formed the French Popular Front in 1935, with the democratizing cultural mission to "open the gates of the beautiful park to the

working class" as a project of national solidarity (Lebovics 45). This progressive national culture accompanied a view of Paris as the center of an international alliance against fascism, a self-conception evident, for example, in the city's hosting of the star-studded 1935 International Congress for the Defense of Culture. The literary icon of this international Popular Front was Malraux, whose *La condition humaine* (1933), published in English as *Man's Fate*, memorialized the failed Shanghai strikes of 1927. Malraux denounced Italy's invasion of Ethiopia (Cruz 205), and during the Spanish Civil War he served the Republican cause with his daring exploits as an aviator, which led to the novel *L'espoir* (*Man's Hope*; 1938). These causes were also important to Wright, who criticized Italian aggression in his reporting for the *Daily Worker* (*Byline* 95–122) and announced on the draft title page of *Uncle Tom's Children*, "To be sold only for the cause of Loyalist Spain 3/18/38" (298). Malraux was ecumenical in his support of political leaders; during a 1937 visit to the United States to obtain financial support for the Spanish Republicans, he claimed that Franklin D. Roosevelt, the French premier Leon Blum, and Joseph Stalin would lead the world toward true democracy (Todd 210).

Wright engaged with contemporary French writing that had been translated into English, including a form of French existentialism, long before his well-documented inspiration by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Speaking at a conference in April 1938, when he was in the heat of writing *Native Son*, Wright said:

[T]he two writers whose works I like the most today are André Malraux and William Faulkner. . . . What Faulkner is to the small area, Malraux is to the progressive movement all over the world, that is, an interpreter. . . . Malraux shows how millions all over the world are trying to rise above a degraded status. I value Malraux higher than I do Faulkner because of the quality of heroic action Malraux depicts in his novels.

(qtd. in Fabre, *Richard Wright* 103)

Ralph Ellison later reminisced about his visits to Wright's Harlem bureau of the *Daily Worker*:

“through one of those odd instances which occur to young provincials in New York, I was to hear Malraux make an appeal for the Spanish Loyalists at the same party where I first heard the folk singer Leadbelly perform” (qtd. in Denning, *Cultural Front* 331). As Lawrence Jackson notes, “Ellison easily identified with [*Man’s Fate’s*] character Kyo, a half-Japanese, half-French rebel leader, an intellectual who strove to provide other men with dignity” (*Ralph Ellison* 170). Barbara Foley’s archival work shows that Wright’s unpublished novel “Black Hope” (whose title riffs on *Man’s Hope*) contains an authorial surrogate whose disquisitions “display Wright’s influence by philosophical novelists from Feodor Dostoevsky to Thomas Mann to André Malraux (whose *Man’s Fate* in fact is directly quoted in the novel)” (“Dramatic Picture” 116). As late as December 1946, Wright still considered “that wonderful Malraux” his favorite contemporary French writer (qtd. in Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 304).

The idea of a fictional Black character quoting *Man’s Fate* raises the issue of narrative voice and, specifically, of how a Black writer can appropriate a problematic work for antiracist purposes. Malraux claimed to have been active in Shanghai’s 1920s communist movement, but he stayed for only a few days in Hong Kong (Leonard xii). *Man’s Fate* might today be criticized as Orientalist—it does not have a major Chinese character, and it arguably transfers a romantic view of the Paris Commune to Shanghai’s French Concession (now Xuhui). Wright may have had doubts about Malraux’s self-mythologization, but he constructed his own Popular Front masterpiece by rewriting the existentialist hero as a Black American. Discussing his thwarted ambitions, Bigger dreams of a career in aviation, business, or the army (Wright, *Native Son* 353–54); his declaration “[W]hat I killed for, I *am!*” expresses a desire not merely for personal agency but for greatness (429). Book 3, “Fate,” which narrates Bigger’s imprisonment and death sentence, parallels part 6 of *Man’s Fate*, in which Kyo is captured during the Kuomintang party’s betrayal of the Communists. Like Kyo, Bigger feels sympathy for

a screaming man on his cell block who has been driven insane by social injustice. Shortly before committing suicide, Kyo achieves solace through a sense of “virile love. He could wail with this crowd of prostrate men. . . . He had fought for what in his time was charged with the deepest meaning and the greatest hope” (Malraux 321–22). During Bigger’s famous epiphany in his jail cell, he imagines “standing in the midst of a vast crowd of men, white men and black men and all men. . . . he would not mind dying now if he could only find out what this meant, what he was in relation to all the others that lived” (Wright, *Native Son* 362–63). Bigger asserts his solidarity with all humanity and in a sense embodies an anti-racist Popular Front progressivism.

Native Son helps to clarify the difference between the literary Popular Front and contemporary models of world literature, which seek to be “a thorn in the side, a permanent intellectual challenge to national literatures” (Moretti, “Conjectures” 162). Moretti’s famous essay “Conjectures on World Literature” might be read as explaining *Native Son’s* relationship to *Man’s Fate*, since “Conjectures” advances a model in which forms and themes are disseminated from a literary core to peripheral areas, where writers can produce striking innovations through “local narrative voice” (158). Although born in the United States, Wright can be described as peripheral, writing about “the only form of life my native land had allowed me to know intimately, that is, the ghetto life of the American Negro” (“How ‘Bigger’” 450). However, Moretti raises the study of world literature to prominence by “pairing it with forms of reading and argument closely associated with quantitative globalization studies” (Hayot 226). Despite his criticism of inequality in the literary world-system, Moretti’s paradigm accentuates “the diminishing place of the nation-state” in the age of globalization (Arac 45).

As Wright indicates in his essay “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” (1940), the nation-state can be an agent of social transformation, since Bigger, “a figure who would hold within him the prophecy of *our future*,” embodies a better America (447; my emphasis). In effect, Wright nationalizes the doomed

revolutionaries in *Man's Fate*, transforming them into antiracist American progressives. Bigger's lawyer Boris Max states, "[B]ecause I, a Jew, dared defend this Negro boy, for days my mail has been flooded with threats against my life. . . . The hunt for Bigger Thomas served as an excuse to terrorize the entire Negro population, to arrest hundreds of Communists, to raid labor union headquarters and workers' organizations" (*Native Son* 385). These leftist rebels might now be seen as opposed to American liberalism, but it is important to remember that Roosevelt gave official diplomatic recognition to the USSR in 1933. Wright admired Roosevelt's populist leadership, even as he criticized the New Deal's shortcomings (Rowley 313). While the CP's John Reed Clubs launched his career, Wright worked for three years as a writer and supervisor for the Federal Writers' Project, which in effect provided a government-sponsored fellowship for the writing of *Native Son* (Borchert 239–44; Davis; Mangione). Like Malraux, "Wright found many friends in high places in the world of politics and government"; his successful application for a Guggenheim fellowship was aided by a reference letter from Eleanor Roosevelt (Walker 119). As a result of the lingering influence of Cold War liberalism, which arguably informs Moretti's emphasis on market-based circulation, there is a tendency to view artists as compromised by such alliances with the state, but Wright and other 1930s writers showed that such alliances can have a progressive valence.

However, Roosevelt's public role as "Dr. New Deal" morphed into that of "Dr. Win-the-War," and after World War II, the United States snuffed out leftist alternatives and reinvented itself as a free-market empire (Brinkley 144). The ideological deviance that communism was construed to represent, and the Inquisition-like character of McCarthyism, has led many critics in the United States to treat party membership in terms of faith versus apostasy. This has resulted in an inattention to the persistent progressive commitments in writers who officially renounced communism. In Malraux's case, there was indeed a shift rightward: in 1944, Malraux resisted the Germans by forming

the Brigade Alsace-Lorraine, and he emerged from the war as an ally of Charles de Gaulle (Lebovics 74). His final novel, *Les noyers de l'Altenburg* (*The Walnut Trees of Altenburg*), published in 1948, was an allegory of disillusionment with communism akin to George Orwell's contemporaneous *Animal Farm*. Upon the advent of the Fifth Republic in 1958, de Gaulle appointed Malraux to the newly created position of Minister of Cultural Affairs. Malraux thus realized the French Popular Front's dream of state support for the arts, yet he did so by becoming a figure for the status quo.

In contrast, Wright maintained an emphasis on race and class conflict. His jeremiad "I Tried to Be a Communist" (1944) criticized CP policies but did not renounce progressive commitments (Zeigler). In his unpublished essay "I Choose Exile" (1950), Wright rejects the consumerist plenitude of post-war America for a political solidarity that recalls the Depression era: "France is, above all, a land of refuge. Even when there is a shortage of food, Frenchmen will share their crusts of bread with strangers. Yet, nowhere do you see so much gaiety as in Paris, nowhere can you hear so much spirited talk. Each contemporary event is tasted, chewed, digested" (4). Had Wright stayed in the United States, he would have faced the wrath of the House Un-American Activities Committee; in his French "land of refuge" he could resist not only the Cold War but also the construction of a politically quietist canon of world literature.

II.

During the Red Scare, which the United States tried to impose on the entire world, the literary Popular Front was marginalized, erased, and sometimes rewritten, as progressive nationalism was transformed into an America-first jingoism (Vials). This ideological clampdown has not only created a vacuum in world literature studies but also affected Black and postcolonial studies. Although we are indebted to Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* for recuperating *The Outsider* and the neglected travel books, Gilroy's claim that Wright's writing "overflows from the confining

structures of the nation state” diminishes Wright’s nation-centered progressivism in both the United States and France, which later influenced decolonizing African and Asian writers (151).

Wright initially visited France at the urging of Gertrude Stein, but his expatriation in 1947 was enabled by his friendship with Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, which involved political, aesthetic, and philosophical affinities that paralleled his affinities with Malraux. In postwar America, there was an “onslaught of Parisian fashion in the form of ideas,” when existentialism was discussed in *Time* as well as the *Partisan Review* (Cotkin 97). The New York Intellectuals eventually rejected Sartre, who, they judged, not only was too close to communism but also showed lax aesthetic standards, since his extolling of ostensibly crude realists like Wright and John Steinbeck entered “the dangerous realm of the middlebrow” (124). In contrast, soon after moving to Paris (which had made him an honorary citizen in 1946), Wright joined Sartre’s political party, the Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire (RDR), which denounced American racism and insisted that France take a neutral position in the Cold War (Dow 45). The RDR did not reject the Marshall Plan, but it pressed for reconstruction efforts to benefit the working class (Fabre, “Richard Wright” 45).

Wright’s engagement with French politics has gone overlooked because it occurred during the Fourth Republic, a period often seen as one of disarray. From 1946 until 1958, there were twenty-one administrations, all lacking a charismatic figure like de Gaulle, who returned to power in response to the Algerian crisis. Nevertheless, France built a strong welfare state that resisted the neoliberal orthodoxies of the United States and the United Kingdom in later decades (Stovall, “No Green Pastures” 191). In *France’s New Deal*, Philip Nord explains that postwar France also built a “culture state” in which a “French culture was every citizen’s birthright” (312), an achievement that can be “chalked up . . . to the Resistance, to an idealistic Left committed to a public-service ethic and the moral reconstitution of the nation” (356). The contrarian Sartre played a role in the formation of the culture

state, which included hosting a 1947 national public radio show based on his journal *Les Temps Modernes*, and Wright also appeared in this progressive French medium, when state airwaves “placed the best writers and poets center stage, . . . elevat[ing] the ‘author’ to virtual icon status” (348).

It would not be fair to criticize Wright for indulging in the myth of a colorblind “French exceptionalism,” since he tried to construct an anti-racist post-Vichy public culture (Pichichero 125). In his 1951 article “American Negroes in France,” which appeared in the progressive French newspaper *L’Observateur* and was reprinted in *The Crisis*, Wright denounced the battle of Cold War superpowers. “Daily, U.S. Negroes have watched French conditions of life sway and retreat under the impact of one or the other of these nationalistic blocs. . . . To an extent that white Americans do not feel the capacity or the need, U.S. Negroes have sought a solidarity with French attitudes” (382). In the fall of 1950, Wright demonstrated this solidarity by forming the FAF, a small interracial organization of American and French intellectuals and artists that included Sartre and the filmmaker Jean Cocteau. Although the FAF affirmed “the internationalism of the human spirit” in its prospectus—authored by Wright—it resisted the Cold War order by criticizing the discriminatory hiring practices of overseas US corporations and government agencies (qtd. in Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 358). The FAF brought international attention to the false charges of rape brought against Willie McGee in Mississippi and the Martinsville Seven in Virginia, and it joined forces with Josephine Baker in protesting injustice in France’s then-colony Côte d’Ivoire (360). The FAF’s politics were combined with jazz shows, painting exhibitions, and public readings of fiction and poetry, much as cultural and political events came together in the venue where Wright and Ellison had gone to see Leadbelly perform and Malraux declaim in New York City in the late 1930s.

However, the FAF was ultimately a quixotic endeavor, since Wright came to doubt that the French New Deal could chart a course between rival imperialisms. The Marshall Plan brought

American money, personnel, and espionage to Paris along with American racism, and meanwhile Sartre expressed strong support for the USSR. The FAF disbanded in December 1951, its finances and personnel piling in comparison with the CIA-backed Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), which sought to win over European leftists to the anticommunist cause. The CCF was stimulated by the American foreign policy elite's concern that "the Soviet Union spent more on cultural propaganda in France alone than the United States did in the entire world" (Saunders 96). Progressives who refused to toe the line were subject to surveillance and harassment, exemplified by Baldwin's 1961 retrospective essay "Alas, Poor Richard." In his account of the FAF's inaugural meeting, Baldwin describes writers, dancers, composers, and jazz musicians "slinking casually past the gaping mouths and astounded eyes of a workingman's bistro, like a disorganized parade" (263). For Baldwin, Popular Front-style politics are a bit of a joke, and so is Wright's anxiety about "the ever-present agents of the CIA, who certainly ought to have had better things to do," but this fear was legitimate (263). According to Wright's biographer Addison Gayle, the organization "angered agents of the military, the FBI, the CIA, and the State Department" (221), and the CIA monitored an FAF conference in April 1951 (219); meanwhile, Baldwin himself supplied reports to the FBI (Jackson, *Indignant Generation* 386). Baldwin's entertaining but misleading essay continues to have negative repercussions: for example, Merve Emre notes that Baldwin simply invented most of his account of the FAF meeting, yet Emre nevertheless quotes extensively from "Alas, Poor Richard" to demonstrate that Wright's organization was "marked . . . for failure" because "paranoia, when conjoined to bureaucratic hubris, facilitates a betrayal of one's historical conditions, one's race" (232).

Far from betraying his race or historical conditions, Wright struggled to give new life to Popular Front ideals. William Maxwell observes in *F.B. Eyes* that Wright took creative inspiration from political intrigue and even state surveillance. This

is evident in *The Outsider*, which might be considered his novel of France, rather than the still-unpublished "Island of Hallucination," drafted in the late 1950s. Although *The Outsider* is usually read in philosophical terms, its protagonist, Cross Damon, embodies the political and aesthetic commitments that Wright and Sartre largely shared. As if the novel were a palimpsest, Paris shows through the American locales: Cross is ostensibly twenty-six years old when the story begins in 1950, but his status resembles that of the novel's author (Wright, born in 1908, was forty-two at this time, with two daughters); he owns a house, drives a car, and supports a wife and three children. Cross's life abruptly changes when he survives a subway accident in Chicago and is mistakenly identified as one of the dead. "Was there a slight chance here," he asks himself, "of his being able to start all over again?" (75). Upon his arrival in New York, Cross goes on a quest for a birth certificate and a draft card, enduring stressful encounters with bureaucracies so as to become "as solidly identified as he felt he could be," much as Wright made fraught trips to the American Embassy in Paris for visa renewals (147). In the essay "There's Always Another Café" (1953), Wright describes his favorite Parisian venues, where he engaged with Americans "fresh from the transatlantic liners"; *The Outsider* draws on these encounters in its political debates and lengthy declamations (84).

Cross's life-altering event can be read as the implicit displacement of the United States for France, where he is allegorically recruited to fight in the cultural Cold War. For Wright, as for the CCF, this political struggle is conducted through art forms, in particular the jazz that Cross listens to in an "ill-lighted tavern . . . filled with a mixture of white and black sporting people" (111). As Penny Von Eschen explains, in the 1950s jazz had ideological value as "America's 'secret weapon,' a unique American art form with which the Soviets could not compete" (22). According to Tyler Stovall's *Paris Noir*, jazz was popular as an "existentialist accessory, played in dim basements on the home turf of the intellectuals, Saint-Germain-des-Prés. . . . Were this experience a musical, it would

advertise words by Richard Wright and music by Sidney Bechet” (163). *The Outsider* links jazz with another major form of Cold War modernism, the abstract painting practiced by Cross’s lover, Eva. Although Eva is a New Yorker, she can also be read as a symbol of Paris, the jewel in the crown of the cultural Cold War: “I’m at last in Paris, city of my dreams!” Eva exults in her diary. “The art exhibits, . . . the love of beauty—will I ever be the same again after all this?” (Wright, *Outsider* 278). As Serge Guilbaut explains in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, in interwar Paris, abstract painting was connected to progressive causes. In contrast, Cold War elites in the United States saw abstract painting as expressing freedom from tyranny and equated such painting with postwar individualism, embodied, for example, in the Wild West persona of Jackson Pollock (Guilbaut). Cross’s relationship with Eva offers a counterpoint to this artistic theft. Cross agrees with Eva that “nonobjective painting expresses the dominant consciousness of modern man” (Wright, *Outsider* 274), but instead of raceless abstractions, he sees in her work “images of latent danger” and “terrors and agonies in form and color” (276, 277). Her “broken forms swimming lyrically in mysterious light” (276) can thus be likened to jazz’s “blue and sensual notes” from “the hearts of [Black] men who had been rejected,” notes that possessed “the frightened ecstasy of the unrepentant” (111).

Seeking an alternative to the CCF’s binary of American freedom and Soviet totalitarianism, *The Outsider* invents a genre that we might call cultural Cold War noir, which retains the legacy of the interwar Popular Front through literary form. In the novel’s central episode, a CP member who takes orders from Moscow rents a room to Cross in order to challenge a racist Greenwich Village landlord; when the rivals have an epic fistfight, Cross bludgeons both of them to death. These plot turns struck many midcentury critics, attuned to New Criticism and high modernism, as melodramatic. However, when the New York district attorney who has identified Cross as the killer tells him “your Nietzsche, your Hegel. . . were the clues” (560), philosophical influences emerge within a

detective plot that also informed *Native Son*. As Paula Rabinowitz notes, “[M]uch popular 1930s fiction included hard-boiled, tough-guy detective and police procedural novels—often written by those connected with left-wing literary radicalism” (82). Rabinowitz argues that *The Outsider*’s violent battles and shady characters are indebted to the detective genre’s cinematic successor, film noir. I would add that Wright’s Cold War noir is a transatlantic cultural hybrid based in Paris; the term *film noir*, after all, comes to English from French, inspired by *Série noire*, the publisher Gallimard’s famous line of detective novels, which included translations of works by writers like Dashiell Hammett. The films were frequently made by leftist artists who registered the decline of the Popular Front’s alliance of liberals and leftists and the rise of Cold War red-baiting (Wald, “Marxism”). Trying to keep the antiracist Popular Front alive, the novel imagines an alliance between progressive France and Black America that resists the designs of elites in both Washington and Moscow. As Vaughn Rasberry observes, *Black Boy* had located the genesis of modern totalitarianism not in Europe but in the Jim Crow South. Accordingly, *The Outsider*’s embodiment of fascism, a Greenwich Village landlord, is not a former Nazi but an American who “began his life as a Texas oil man. . . . He has the old-fashioned American racist notions, all of them. . . . He hates not only Negroes, Jews, Chinese, but *all* non-Anglo-Saxons” (Wright, *Outsider* 264). As Abdul JanMohamed notes, after Cross kills the rival totalitarians, he “witnesses the ‘birth of a new Eva,’ who is now more independent and in control of her own life” (200). While JanMohamed reads the novel in psychoanalytic terms, *The Outsider*’s extolling of Eva’s freedom accords with the cultural and political mission of the FAF, which “declares its willingness to stand in solidarity with those Frenchmen who place freedom before all else” (Wright, “American Negroes” 382–83).

Yet the FAF was a fraught enterprise, and *The Outsider* expresses anxiety regarding Wright’s role in the Fourth Republic instead of triumphant solidarity. In her diary, Eva exults, “I’m beginning to adore colored people. . . . I wish I was a warm,

rich, brown color" (Wright, *Outsider* 284). The lines register Wright's suspicion that he may have been a mere figurehead for French intellectuals, who perceived him as writing merely out of experience with little sophistication (Nowlin 278). For his part, Cross spies on Eva by reading her diary, despite his criticism of "spies spying upon spies . . . [in] an elaborate kind of transparent ant heap" (Wright, *Outsider* 453). Cross himself wants to be a domineering "little god," and Eva is not impressed but rather horrified when he reveals that he killed the communist and the fascist, and she jumps to her death from a window (308). Mark Christian Thompson highlights these passages to argue that Wright "finds totalitarianism, driven by the Nietzschean will to power, to be nothing less than the very ontological basis of sovereignty in Western political theory" (144). While Thompson's analysis of *The Outsider* in terms of 1930s European fascism overlooks Wright's effort to create an antifascist public culture in the United States and postwar France, it does illuminate the novel's the disillusionment with Cold War statecraft.

Despite this disillusionment, the novel maintains progressive commitments through an overlooked subplot that involves Cross's friendship with Bob Hunter, a train attendant and union organizer who faces deportation to Trinidad. The character suggests Wright's close friend C. L. R. James, the leftist Trinidadian writer who embodied the postwar fate of the literary Popular Front: he fought deportation for five years, was arrested, and wrote most of *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* during his detainment on Ellis Island (James 125). In his reading of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, James equates Ahab with both Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler and warns of totalitarianism in the United States (16), yet he sees a potential for redemption in the *Pequod's* interracial group of laborers. Similarly, *The Outsider* rejects fascism for a laborist sensibility; as Konstantina Karageorgos points out, the activist Sarah Hunter, Bob's wife, holds to a "non-aligned Marxism [that] is the closest approximation to Wright's own political position" (122–23). Cross ends the novel by seeking out his

acquaintance Hattie, an African American widow who faces eviction from her house; he wants to help pay her rent, which would be incongruous if he were merely an "African American Übermensch" (Thompson 156). Instead, Cross holds to a Parisian ethic of "shar[ing] . . . crusts of bread with strangers" (Wright, "I Choose Exile" 4), although he is assassinated while on his way to Hattie's place.

In terms of reviews and sales, Wright's novel suffered in comparison with Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). Yet these writers recruited the bildungsroman and picaresque for postwar America by overwriting their earlier leftist convictions. Put differently, *The Outsider* exposes the postwar construction of what we now know as World Literature, which recruited Goethe for the cultural Cold War. The lasting influence of organizations like the CCF can be seen in Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*. Casanova denigrates literary realism, arguing that it "excludes any form of literary autonomy and makes literary production a function of politics," thus negating the use that Wright made of modernists like Joyce for socially progressive fiction like *Uncle Tom's Children* (197). Casanova's celebration of Joyce, William Faulkner, and Henry James recalls the midcentury pantheon of white men whose artistic innovations supposedly attested to the freedom of the Western world. When she extolls Samuel Beckett for transposing the great revolution in abstract painting to literature, her account of his "radical autonomy," which entails an "unprecedented degree of abstraction," parallels Cold War critics' celebration of painters like Pollock (346).

Indeed, scholars of American literature might read Casanova's concept of literary autonomy as a specifically CIA-endorsed construct (Spahr 105). It is telling that the second half of *The World Republic of Letters* begins with an epigraph from *Invisible Man*, and yet Ellison is never actually discussed (Casanova 173). In Foley's account of Ellison's writing process, the antileftist version of *Invisible Man* (which had different ideological investments in earlier drafts) racially diversifies Cold War liberalism while blotting out Ellison's

earlier progressive affiliations (*Wrestling*). *Invisible Man* plays a similar role in Casanova's account of Paris, diversifying the Republic of Letters while erasing the interwar Popular Front. In short, when Casanova extolls literary autonomy, she is at her least autonomous: she worries about the commercial vulgarities of American globalization undermining Paris's artistic preeminence (168–72), but the globalizing pretensions of her model appear to be those forged by the Marshall Plan and the CCF.

Nevertheless, Casanova's *La république mondiale des lettres*—which, as Damrosch observes, “might better be titled *La République parisienne des lettres*” (*What* 27)—helps to illuminate Wright's influence in midcentury Paris. In particular, Casanova provides a compelling account of *consecration*, a process by which critics, agents, and translators give worth to literary works that are not necessarily prized by the market (12). For Casanova, Sartre is the postwar consecrator par excellence, but she does not consider whether immigrants to France, who made her own book more racially ecumenical than it would have been otherwise, were also consecrators. Wright helped to preserve the legacy of an antiracist Parisian literary culture, which might seem to have been snuffed out by the Nazi occupation (Edwards 284). As a critic, editor, and cofounder of the journal *Présence Africaine*, Wright was a consecrator of Black writing from around the world, and he fostered a “Golden Age of African American literature” that was just as brilliant as the celebrated Lost Generation of Ernest Hemingway (Stovall, *Paris* 182). Baldwin himself testifies to Wright's efficacy: “young Negroes would cross the ocean and come to Richard's door, wanting his sympathy, his help, his time, his money” (265). Duplicating the support that he himself had received through the Federal Writers' Project, Wright secured Baldwin a major fellowship after Baldwin knocked on his door in Brooklyn with an unfinished manuscript (Rowley 315–16). This sponsorship continued in Paris; Wright's literary agent, Jenny Bradley, even provided Baldwin with coal during the winter of 1953–54 while he composed *Giovanni's Room* (Cossu-Beaumont 150).

Most importantly, Wright enabled Baldwin's career-making “Everybody's Protest Novel” (1949), “a liberatory statement . . . that freed black writers from the clichés of the previous generation” (Jackson, *Indignant Generation* 287). Baldwin claims that his friendship with Wright was damaged by the essay's brief and muted critique of *Native Son* as a work of protest fiction (256). They continued to associate in venues such as the FAF, however, and Wright was exploring complex psychological and philosophical issues in his own writing. Remarkably, “it was Wright who had asked Themistocles Hoetis to publish this controversial article in *Zero*,” a Paris-based little magazine that Wright's friend Hoetis edited (Fabre, *Unfinished Quest* 362). In Casanova's terms, Baldwin was consecrated by Wright and Hoetis in Paris, not by the editor Philip Rahv in New York, since *Partisan Review* reprinted “Everybody's Protest Novel” only months later.

To be sure, Baldwin alienated Wright by writing a follow-up attack on *Native Son*, “Many Thousands Gone” (1951), and by serving as an FBI informant. Still, Wright converted Baldwin from Cold War liberalism to a more activist sensibility, despite Baldwin's resistance to this influence in “Alas, Poor Richard.” When Baldwin visited Wright's homeland in the American South to report on the civil rights movement, he himself came under scrutiny by the FBI (Washington 3). James Campbell remarks in his scathing account of Wright in *Exiled in Paris* that “Baldwin had become more Parisian” than Wright in that “he was now fully *engagé*” (211). Pace Campbell, when Baldwin repurposed his elegant modernist style for progressive change in *The Fire This Time* (1964), his causes looked less like those of the CCF and more like those of the FAF's transatlantic Popular Frontism. Seemingly outdated in the mid-century United States, this model of literary internationalism was broadly circulated and translated in the decolonizing world.

III.

Vijay Prashad claims that “the Third World was not a place. It was a project,” an effort to create societies

based on dignity, justice, and peace (*Darker Nations* xv). In Monica Popescu's account this emancipatory project drew Asian and African writers into the cultural Cold War and its rival "aesthetic world systems"—a modernist system engineered by the capitalist United States and a realist system by the communist Soviet Union—which involved negotiating rival worlds of funding, conferences, and publishers (93; see also Kalliney). Meanwhile, Djagalov has illuminated the transformation of the interwar Soviet Republic of Letters into the Afro-Asian Writers' Association, a rival to Western cultural imperialism and Casanova's Republic of Letters. Yet interwar Popular Front literature, including that of Malraux and, most of all, Wright, also enabled Third World writers to imagine progressive nationalisms and gave them aesthetic flexibility during the Cold War's battle of superpowers.

The irony here is that while Wright's early work can be aligned with national liberation movements in Africa and Asia, which were "the last major wave of socialism," his own 1950s travel books narrate missed connections with these very movements (Cheah, *Spectral Nationality* 180). In his account of the Gold Coast (now Ghana), *Black Power* (1954), Wright claims to be amazed by Kwame Nkrumah's fusion of "tribalism with modern politics," which "smacked of the dreamlike, of the stuff of which art and myths were made" (*Three Books* 82). Many elements of decolonizing Ghana, such as public demonstrations and the remarkable agency of women, were not so exotic but were in fact things that he had celebrated in *Uncle Tom's Children*. Instead of drawing these connections, Wright exhorts Nkrumah to "free minds from mumbo-jumbo" by subjecting Africans to "firm social discipline": "AFRICAN LIFE MUST BE MILITARIZED!" (415, 414, 415). In Kwame Anthony Appiah's view, "There is something simply mad in proposing . . . that Nkrumah—like Hitler and Mussolini?—needs the instruments of fascism if the trains of the Gold Coast are to run on time" (201). Whether or not Wright literally advocates fascism, he definitely takes part in the degradation of the progressive Popular Front ethos into postwar American exceptionalism. *Black Power*

equates Nkrumah's struggle against the United Kingdom with the American Revolution and ignores emergent African literature by ending with a quotation from Walt Whitman (420).

In effect, Wright developed his own version of American modernization theory, an undemocratic model of postcolonial independence.² In the 1930s, progressive writers in the United States held to a "sequential view of American society's development" derived from the Enlightenment (Rossinow 109). As Fabre explains, for Wright "the saga of the black nation in the United States . . . illustrate[d] a striking but representative aspect of a general twentieth-century phenomenon: the technological and social change, caused by industrialization, resulting in urbanization becoming a way of life" (*Unfinished Quest* 234). This model of Black Enlightenment might sound homogenizing and deterministic. However, in *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941), which narrates the Great Migration, Wright celebrates a folk culture rooted in the agricultural South as well as urban forms of cultural expression such as "blues, jazz, swing," and other "'spirituals' of the city pavements" (128). This Popular Front multiculturalism emphasizes common American aspirations for political agency and economic betterment: "The differences between black folk and white folk are not blood or color, and the ties that bind us are deeper than those that separate us. . . . We watch each new procession. The hot wires carry urgent appeals. Print compels us. Voices are speaking. Men are moving! And we shall be with them" (147). Wright's narrative is accompanied by photographs taken by Edwin Rosskam for the Farm Security Administration, a New Deal program; this collaboration again reveals the Popular Front's connection to progressive national government. *Native Son* also tells this story of the Great Migration, national development, and antiracist alliances by focusing on a single individual, Bigger Thomas (readers often overlook that the twenty-year-old Bigger is a Mississippian who lived in the South until at least age twelve).

In his 1950s writing on the Third World, Wright continued to use the rhetoric of progress

and freedom, but his narrative of development highlights domineering leaders, a culturally homogenizing model of an “ordered, rational world in which we all can share,” and anticommunism (*Three Books* 594). Wright respected French history and culture, which made for the productive synergy with post-Vichy France described above, but he did not have a similar respect for the cultures and nations of the Third World, which he associated with “the dead past” and “foolish customs” of “tradition and religion” (722). His late work on decolonizing nations therefore contrasts with his earlier work that centered on the United States and France. For example, in his introduction to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton’s 1945 sociological study of Chicago, *Black Metropolis*, Wright claims that Black Americans “believe in the hope of economic rewards; they believe in justice, liberty, the integrity of the individual. In the heart of industrial America is . . . a saving remnant of a passion for freedom” (lxvii). Wright also celebrates the potential freedom of industrial modernity in *White Man, Listen!* (1957), but this later book gives a salvific role to leaders like Sukarno, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Gamal Abdel Nasser, “the FREEST MEN IN ALL THE WORLD TODAY . . . eager to build industrial civilizations” (*Three Books* 722). Wright’s top-down model of modernization has much in common with that of Cold War elites in Washington, DC, who often backed autocratic leaders in developing nations (Latham). As Wright explains, “Sukarno, Nehru, Nasser, and others will necessarily use quasi-dictatorial methods to hasten the process of social evolution and to establish order in their lands” (*Three Books* 725). This modernization in fast-forward is necessary “so that Communism cannot take root, so that vast populations trapped in tribal or religious loyalties cannot be easily duped by self-seeking demagogues” (702).

Wright’s book about the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, *The Color Curtain* (1956), is a vexed attempt to combine Third World self-determination with anticommunist Cold War liberalism. For Prashad, *The Color Curtain* “inaugurates our tradition of AfroAsian studies,” but it is a problematic foundational

document (“Bandung” xi). Although he does not discuss literature, Wright implicitly comments on translation and circulation: “I felt while at Bandung that the English language was about to undergo one of the most severe tests in its long and glorious history” (*Three Books* 592). Since English was the major language of the conference, “the strident moral strictures against the Western world preached at Bandung were uttered in the language of the cultures that the delegates were denouncing! I felt that there was something just and proper about it; by this means English was coming to contain a new extension of feeling, of moral knowledge” (592). *The Color Curtain* arguably seeks to contain this moral knowledge by inscribing decolonizing critiques within parameters set by Washington, DC. Wright states that the Bandung Conference’s final communiqué, which stressed cooperation among Asian and African countries, “sounds innocent enough, but . . . spells out what Jack London called the ‘Yellow Peril’ and no less!” (594). Defining the “Yellow Peril” as the lowering of Western living standards due to Asian economic competition, Wright nevertheless urges “the Western world [to] willingly aid in the creation of Jack London’s ‘Yellow Peril’ in terms of Asians’ and Africans’ processing their own raw materials,” since “militant hordes buoyed and sustained by racial and religious passions” will be susceptible to fascism (which Wright associates with prewar Japan) or Chinese and Soviet communism (605). Wright’s form of Cold War antitotalitarian discourse, which paradoxically uses a racist anti-Asian term to criticize Western economic privilege, is relatable to his compromised position as a writer. In order to travel to Indonesia, the financially troubled Wright turned to the CCF, which “insert[ed] him bodily into a transnational community of cultural contacts covertly engineered by the CIA” (Roberts 156; see also Wilford 197–224). Arguably positing an “Orientalist anti-Communism” (Mullen 67), *The Color Curtain*’s description of Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, who “had no little experience in organizing mystic-minded peasants” and “would be content for a while to snuggle as close as possible to this gummy mass and watch and wait,” does not give

anticolonial nationalism much ideological breathing room (Wright, *Three Books* 599). Departing from the ideals of the Bandung Conference, Wright ultimately endorses a form of Cold War individualism. When he declares himself “a Western man of color” in *White Man, Listen!* and wishes that “all men could share [his] creative restlessness,” he promotes himself as the embodiment of Third World aspirations (701, 705).

In the circulation of Wright’s early work, however, both in English and in translation, his vision of an antiracist Popular Front helped Bandung-era writers to imagine socially just postcolonial nations. Although they never met, Wright moved in the same Indonesian social circles as Pramoedya Ananta Toer, who later became famous for the *Buru Quartet* (1980–88). In 1951, a pamphlet put out by the Indonesian embassy in the United States identified Toer as a literary disciple of Wright, Steinbeck, and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, thus giving him a Popular Front heritage (41). Toer related *Black Boy* to his own experience of Dutch and Japanese colonialism, commending Wright’s book for its “bitter realism . . . [of] facts that have to be swallowed raw. . . . The book sends a shiver down the spine of the reader as he or she becomes aware of the danger of genocide” (47). Along with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Toer is the central literary figure in Pheng Cheah’s *Spectral Nationality*, which makes him the exponent of a progressive anticolonial nationalism that might have ultimately failed as an emancipatory project but nevertheless continues to haunt the repressive postcolonial state. Cheah’s philosophical approach to reading postcolonial literature as world literature begins with Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and extends to Jacques Derrida, leading him to defend himself from the “wrong impression of a division of labor between European philosophy and literature from the postcolonial South” (*What* 14). Lacking in Cheah is an account of the literary Popular Front’s influence, since Wright’s early work offered postcolonial writers like Toer a compelling alternative to CCF-backed journals like Indonesia’s *Konfrontasi*.

In addition to writing novels, Toer translated works like Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* (1937) into Indonesian. Translation is one of the activities of what Casanova calls a “cosmopolitan clergy,” although she diverts attention from progressive alternatives by making the French translator of Joyce, Valéry Larbaud, into a high priest of transnational modernism (142). Wright’s work was translated by an eclectic group, including the French novelist and jazz trumpeter Boris Vian and the Dutch writer-translator Margrit de Sablonière, whose own book *Apartheid* (1960) was banned in South Africa. The most important was Marcel Duhamel, an “ace translator” who worked with the prestigious publisher Gallimard and was best known as the founder of *Série noire* (Cottenet 128). In his youth Duhamel was a part of the surrealist movement and the leftist Rue du Château group, which included André Breton and Jacques Prévert; the surrealists were to have a huge influence on Négritude (Kesteloot 37–45). Also an actor, Duhamel had a role in Jean Renoir’s *The Crime of Monsieur Lange* (1936), a Popular Front film about a publishing cooperative. After the war, his antiracist sensibility persisted in his choice of translations and in his unofficial role as an agent. When Chester Himes followed Wright’s star to Paris, Duhamel encouraged Himes to write his famous Harlem detective novels about Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, which may have been influenced by Duhamel’s earlier surrealist thinking (Eburne).

Through translators like Duhamel, Wright enabled a generation of progressive Black francophone writers. The Senegalese novelist and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène drew heavily on Duhamel’s translation of *Native Son*, *Un enfant du pays* (1947), for his debut novel *Le docker noir* (*The Black Docker*; 1956), which features a Bigger Thomas-like protagonist who fights racial exploitation by criminal means (Thomas 107–12). According to Sembène’s biographer, Samba Gadjigo, “Sembène admitted that he was hugely indebted to Richard Wright. . . [for] subject-matter, plot structure, and authorial intent” (144). This is also true for Sembène’s masterpiece

Les bouts de bois de Dieu (*God's Bits of Wood*; 1960), which depicts the famous 1947–48 railway strike in French West Africa. Sembène moved to France in September 1946, and he had not set foot in Africa for over ten years when he composed the novel. Although he drew on his own experience as a labor activist in Dakar and Marseilles, the influence of Popular Front literature is signaled unequivocally in *God's Bits of Wood* when an organizer borrows a book from the leader of the strike: “*La Condition Humaine* . . . ‘Everything we need is in this book,’ [he] said” (86–87). The appearance of *Man's Fate* in colonial Senegal as an instruction manual might seem a precise fictional representation of “a compromise between foreign form and local materials” (Moretti, “Conjectures” 154), save that Sembène rejected the Morettian model of core and periphery: “For me, Africa is the centre of the world. The United States and Europe are on the periphery of my world” (qtd. in Thomas 82). Sembène rejects not literary circulation per se, but rather a model of literary underdevelopment, and he mailed a copy of the manuscript from Marseilles to Malraux himself in Paris, a reminder for the newly appointed minister of cultural affairs of his earlier leftist convictions (Gadjigo 140).

Although Sembène was a member of the French Communist Party that had declared Wright as well as Malraux persona non grata, Wright's early stories helped him to resist the Cold War's division between the “aesthetic world-systems” of realism and modernism (Popescu 93). Aduke Adebayo insists that we read their oeuvres against each other, and in particular, Wright influenced Sembène's representation of violence and its galvanizing effect on a political community. The scene in *God's Bits of Wood* in which a white colonial shoots three young native boys rewrites a similar scene in Wright's “Big Boy Leaves Home”; Aunt Sue in *Bright and Morning Star* (translated by Vian for the two inaugural issues of *Présence Africaine*) serves as a model for the militant women and especially the rifle-toting Penda, who, like Sue, is martyred when she is shot down by the authorities (Sembène 204). But as Fabre suggests, *Fire and Cloud*, which narrates a march demanding food

relief, was especially influential for *God's Bits of Wood* (“Richard Wright's Critical Reception” 313). Translated by Duhamel as *Le feu dans la nuée*, the novella appeared in two parts in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1945 and then in *Les enfants de l'oncle Tom* (*Uncle Tom's Children*), which included an introduction by Paul Robeson, in 1947. *Fire and Cloud* was also performed as a radio show in 1948, with the French-Algerian actor Habib Benglia in the role of the demonstration leader Reverend Taylor (Peyrol). Often misidentified as an actual event, the climactic women's march from Thiès to Dakar in *God's Bits of Wood* is Sembène's invention, with no precedent in West African labor history (Jones 124). The women's march recalls various scenes in Popular Front literature but especially the conclusion of *Fire and Cloud*, in which female activists confront accommodationist men and sing in order to raise demonstrators' spirits (Sembène 192; Wright, *Uncle* 218). In short, although Wright himself was ultimately frustrated by Cold War politics, the translation of his early work, as well as his attempt to build an antiracist French public culture, enabled Sembène to write a novel that heralded the advent of independent Senegal.

This is why Apter's notion of “untranslatability,” which insists on “cultural incommensurability” and “the right not to translate” (“Untranslatability” 199), overlooks the way translation can challenge a deeply unfair economic and literary world system. Wright's influence can be summarized by looking at Frantz Fanon, who is not only a premier theorist of anticolonial nationalism but also a literary critic who built on the tradition established by essays like “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born.” Wright and Fanon both presented at the First International Conference of Black Writers and Artists, sponsored by *Présence Africaine*, in Paris in 1956, and this concurrence has led scholars to observe an overlap in their thought (Julien). But Wright's influence began earlier, since Fanon absorbed works like *Un enfant du pays* while he was a medical student in Lyons in the late 1940s, and he wrote Wright an admiring letter in 1953. “Cher monsieur” (“Dear sir”), Fanon writes,

Je m'excuse de la liberté que je prends de vous écrire. . . . Je travaille à une étude sur la portée humaine de vos ouvrages. De vous, je possède: *Native Son*, *Black boy*, *Twelve millions of Black Voices*, *Les enfants de l'Oncle Tom* que j'ai commandé. . . . J'ai écrit un essai *Peau Noire*, *Masques Blancs*, paru au Seuil, où je me proposais de montrer les méconnaissances systématiques des Blancs et des Noirs. (Letter)

I apologize for taking the liberty of writing to you. . . . I am working on a study of the human scope of your writing. I own these books by you: *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, *Twelve Million Black Voices*, *Uncle Tom's Children*. . . . I wrote an essay, *Black Skin*, *White Masks*, published by Seuil, where I proposed to show the systematic misunderstandings between Whites and Blacks. (my trans.)

As Fabre remarks, among all Black writers, “it is probably Frantz Fanon. . . who derived the most from Wright’s fiction. It appears that his analysis of cultural colonization and even of the restorative, cleansing power of ‘revolutionary’ violence was inspired by Wright’s depiction of Bigger” (“Richard Wright’s Critical Reception” 314). While *Black Skin*, *White Masks* cites *Native Son* in its analysis of the psychological effects of racism, *The Wretched of the Earth* applies Wright’s novel to a colonial context. As Fanon’s biographer David Macey observes, it is unfair to claim that Fanon celebrated violence for its own sake, since French colonialism in Algeria was constituted upon violence. Instead, Fanon takes the remarkable view that psychiatric disorders can be overcome through anticolonial struggle, which makes his “social psychiatry [far] removed from psychoanalytic theory” (Macey 432). This element of *The Wretched of the Earth* recalls Bigger’s cry at the end of *Native Son*—“[W]hat I killed for, I am!” (429). Celebrating the idea of remaking self and society through a confrontation with death, Fanon revisits the political existentialism of *Man’s Fate* that a young Wright had found so compelling.

Most importantly, Wright’s antiracist nationalism informs Fanon’s stress on “nation building” and his conviction that “national consciousness . . .

is alone capable of giving us an international dimension” (*Wretched* 141, 179). Pace Apter, Duhamel’s French renderings of Wright’s early work turned Popular Front ideals into progressive translatables. Fanon dictated much of *The Wretched of the Earth* to his wife while he was terminally ill, but he delivered part of the chapter “On National Culture” at the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome in 1959. This literary aspect of Fanon’s book reminds readers that while he committed “body and soul to the national struggle” (167), his Algeria was also an imaginative construct. Often portrayed by Western readers as the voice of the revolution, Fanon might be viewed as an immigrant who turned to Popular Front literature in order to construct a role for himself in the emergent Algerian nation. As Macey remarks, “[H]is personal enthusiasms . . . appear to be somewhat out of step with those of the FLN, few of whose members can have shared his taste for Chester Himes [and] Richard Wright” (386). But Wright and Himes enabled Fanon to imagine an Algerian civic nation, fostered through anticolonial struggle, that would be more enlightened than France itself.

Celebrating the nation-building power of the creative artist, “On National Culture” recuperates the iconography of the Great Depression years. “The storyteller once again gives free rein to his imagination, innovates, and turns creator. It even happens that unlikely characters for such a transformation, social misfits, such as outlaws or drifters, are rediscovered and rehabilitated” (*Wretched* 174). In a sense Fanon himself was a misfit who highlighted the agency of social groups, especially the urban lumpenproletariat, who were marginalized or denigrated in conventional Marxist thought but vindicated by Wright and other writers in the 1930s (Mills 28–29). *The Wretched of the Earth* pays particular homage to *Native Son*’s extolling of interracial alliances and the universality of Bigger’s vision of “white men and black men and all men” (Wright, *Native Son* 162). “Some members of the colonialist population prove to be closer, infinitely closer, to the nationalist struggle than certain native sons. The racial and racist dimension is transcended on both sides. . . [during] the national

struggle and in the universal fight conducted by man for his liberation” (Fanon, *Wretched* 95).

While Wright’s and Fanon’s phrasing might be androcentric, they provide an alternative to the globalization-driven model of world literature. Most recently, Moretti’s *Far Country: Scenes from American Culture* takes the Lost Generation-era Hemingway as its representative interwar writer, and Damrosch’s *Around the World in Eighty Books* steers clear of Moscow, Black Paris, and Bandung and discusses Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) without once mentioning Wright. Although Moretti’s and Damrosch’s book titles evoke the unfettered mobility of the American frontier and the travel industry, even a Jules Verne character would have trouble navigating our contemporary world of health, economic, and ecological crises, as Damrosch admits (xvi). The Great Recession of 2008, as well as the coronavirus pandemic, have stimulated a renewed investment in the activist state, accompanied by progressive forms of internationalism. It is thus vital to recover the interwar model of world literature that inspired Wright’s early work and that he inspired in turn, since new Popular Fronts against corporate power and environmental destruction will be enabled by literature that imagines a better world.

NOTES

This essay was itself enabled by progressive international literary networks. Keith Michael Green encouraged me to relate Wright’s work to translation. My presentation for Keith’s panel, “Non-English Languages and Black Transnationalism,” at the 2022 MLA convention received comments from Jiann-Chyng Tu and Vera Kutzinski. Vera helped me transcribe and translate Fanon’s letter to Wright, which was generously provided by Mary Ellen Budney at Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Herman Lebovics, Brian Russell Roberts, Stephen Schryer, and Dominic Thomas offered insights. At Hunan Normal University, I benefited from editorial work for Hunan Normal University Press’s *Journal of Foreign Languages and Cultures*, whose articles on world literature have influenced my own thought.

1. At the end of Joyce’s story, snow “was falling . . . upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay

buried. . . [Conroy’s] soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead” (194). In Wright’s story, it is rain instead of snow that memorializes Aunt Sue, who is “buried in the depths of her star, . . . not feeling her flesh growing cold, cold as the rain that fell from the invisible sky upon the doomed living and the dead that never dies” (Wright, *Uncle* 263).

2. For Wright and modernization theory, see Cobb; Raspberry; Reynolds. One might relate this discourse of modernization, which arguably evades politics altogether, to Wright’s increasingly compromised position in Paris after the start of the Algerian War in 1954. As Maxwell observes, Wright was caught up in “the guilty contradiction between black expatriate sympathy for Algerian independence and black expatriate reluctance to risk expulsion from metropolitan France” (178). The contradiction came to a head in 1958, when the journalist Richard Gibson attempted to get the cartoonist Oliver Harrington into trouble with French authorities by forging a letter in which Harrington denounced France’s war in Algeria (see Gibson). Wright’s own involvement in the convoluted “Gibson affair” seems a diversion from a critical public stance that would have been in keeping with his now-distant Popular Front ideals.

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Abstract: Richard Wright is exemplary of an interwar version of world literature, undergirded by the cultural centers of Moscow and Paris, that valorized progressive antiracist nationalism. Influenced by leftist writers like André Malraux, Wright created the masterpiece of this literary Popular Front, *Native Son*. During the postwar Red Scare, Wright continued his Popular Front-style cultural politics in Paris, helping France resist the CIA-engineered cultural Cold War. His underappreciated *The Outsider* resists the construction of a politically quietist canon of high modernist world literature. Although Wright himself later advanced an American exceptionalist perspective in the 1950s, the circulation and translation of his early work inspired a generation of anticolonial writers, such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Ousmane Sembène, and Frantz Fanon. Today's globalization-driven world literature models overlook or actively seek to discredit Wright's progressive and antiracist model.