

---

# Richard Wright's *Black Power*

---

Colonial Politics and the Travel Narrative<sup>1</sup>

*S. Shankar*

*Textual Traffic: Colonialism, Modernity and the Economy of the Text* by S. Shankar. Reprinted by permission of the State University of New York Press ©2001, State University of New York. All rights reserved.

In *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (1954), Richard Wright turns his attention to a dimension of the diasporic black experience that he had not previously explored in any great detail. What, *Black Power* asks, sometimes explicitly and always implicitly, is the relationship of Richard Wright, this black man of the diaspora, to Africa? *Black Power* is an account of Wright's journey to the Gold Coast during the summer of 1953, four years before the achievement of independence by that country.<sup>2</sup> During his stay in the Gold Coast, Wright not only witnesses first hand the activities of Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party as it campaigns for the achievement of full independence, but also explores (as the subtitle to the book suggests) his "reactions" to Africa.<sup>3</sup>

Wright's title to his book acquires a special resonance for readers who come to the travel narrative after the Sixties when the Black Power movement of which Kwame Touré was a part gave the term popular currency. I have found no evidence linking Wright's use of the term directly with that of the movement of the Sixties. Wright's text, of course, predates the Black Power movement by more than a decade.

It is interesting to note the nationalist overtones of the Black Power movement of the Sixties in this context and to remark that, perhaps independently, the same phrase is applied to the nationalist aspirations of two different black populations. What this correspondence suggests is the continuity of language and historical vision in the African-American political tradition. Indeed, as C. L. R. James asserted in his essay on Kwame Touré entitled "Black Power": "Stokely [Kwame Touré] and the advocates of Black Power stand on the shoulders of all that has gone before. . . . [T]oo many people see Black Power and its advocates as some sort of portent, a sudden apparition. . . . It is nothing of the kind. It represents the high peak of thought on the Negro question which has been going on for over half a century" (367). What links together the two uses of the same phrase, then, is the complex political ferment in the black world from Marcus Garvey to Nelson Mandela. Recognizing the resonances of the phrase "Black Power" in this fashion allows us to place Wright's travelogue within the context of this political tradition.

*Black Power* is a travel narrative and it is with reference to this generic identity of the text, too, that I want to carry out my explorations of *Black Power* in this essay. In discussing the text here, I am interested in posing certain questions regarding the discursive *economy* of Wright's text as a travel narrative written in the colonial context. Elsewhere, I explore in some detail the implications of the term "economy" as it is applicable to texts, but it may be useful to make some schematic points here about the term.<sup>4</sup> What is an economy? As I use the term here, it refers to a *systemic* operation through which *value* is produced and distributed between the different elements that go to make up the system. The term "value" is of central importance to an understanding of "economy." "Value" and "economy" go together as terms. If we were to use a spatial metaphor, and it is only a metaphor, we might call an "economy" a hierarchical structure which is also a machine for producing and concentrating value at specific sites.

I believe the term "economy" can be usefully applied to a text (such as a written narrative) so as to illuminate the functioning of the text in new ways. I make this assertion to foreground the ways in which a text operates as a mechanism for the production and distribution of a certain kind of "value." If we learn to regard the text as an economy, we are able to discern the materialist ways in which the text assigns value selectively, that is, to note how the value-codings of the text have their origins outside the text. This argument cannot be further explored here. Suffice it to note that value signifies plenitude or fullness. With reference to narratives of travel written in the colonial context, I have found the word "economy" especially useful in thematizing certain aspects of both the colonial travel narra-

tive (that is, narratives of travel to colonized countries written by travelers from colonizing countries) and narratives that are deployed counter to it. Applying the term "economy" in this context reveals both the ways in which the colonial travel narrative places different elements in relationship with each other in such a fashion as to produce Europe or the metropolis as a site of concentrated "value," the site of a moral and historical fullness, and the ways in which such a production and distribution of value is contested in counter deployments.

In reading Wright's *Black Power* as a textual economy that is also a travel narrative, then, some of the questions that I propose to ask in this essay are: In what ways does the specific economy of *Black Power* respond to the generic economy—economy of the genre—of the "colonial travel narrative"? That is, how does *Black Power* articulate and rearticulate the value-codings of the *typical* colonial travel narrative? How does the travel narrative become a vehicle for Wright's own "reactions" to Africa? What are the implications of Wright's identification of himself as an African-American traveler to Africa? How does the examination of the economy of *Black Power* help us to re-evaluate the critical responses to the text? There is much to be said about *Black Power* and the notion of a textual economy in this context. I have to restrict my self to only some aspects of this discussion here. In what follows, I foreground certain questions about the specific value-codings of colonial discourse in the relatively uncommon case of a black American's travels in Africa. In the process, we learn something about both Wright's *Black Power* and the functionings of colonial discourse.

## I. Outsiders in History

Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953) is the story of Cross Damon, a disillusioned black man in Chicago, who takes the opportunity of a train crash that he is involved in to change his identity and disappear in the attempt to remake his life. In New York, under an assumed identity, he joins up with some Communists and finds himself in the midst of a cynical contest for power between Communists and a segregationist. Watching the world with the new freedom that the veil of his assumed identity gives him, Damon comes to a number of realizations regarding the human condition and the exercise of power in such a condition.

Both the Communists and the segregationists, Damon realizes, have understood the meaninglessness of life. Their exercise of power is an attempt to fill the void of human existence. This insight into the meaninglessness of life, Damon concludes, is what permits the monstrously efficient exercise of power on the part of

Communists and segregationists. In his anger at such cynicism, Damon kills both Herndon, the southern racist, and Blount, the Communist. As these murders lead him on to other murders, Damon, ironically, begins to confront his own arbitrary and cynical exercise of power.

*The Outsider*, even echoing Camus's *L'Étranger* in its title, can be read as an existentialist novel. Published during Wright's exile in Paris, external evidence strongly invites such a reading. I am more interested, however, in other dimensions of the concept of "the outsider" as it is set forth by Wright. "The outsider" is posited by Wright in the novel as a historical category. Outsiders in the novel are people who have understood the meaninglessness of life and are, therefore, able to detach themselves from the systemic functioning of power and view it from the "outside." Such outsiders may themselves engage in the cynical exercise of power, as do the Communists, or may struggle with the very cynicism of such power, as do Damon and Ely Houston, the hunchbacked white district attorney who befriends Damon and then hunts him down.

In a long declamation towards the end of the novel about totalitarian systems and their origins in an attempt to militate against and invalidate the meaninglessness of life, Damon observes that "As long as this works, it's wonderful. The only real enemies of this system are not the rats [who are controlled] themselves, but those outsiders who are conscious of what is happening and who seek to change the consciousness of the rats who are being controlled" (*Outsider* 362-3). The outsider, in Wright's novel, is the privileged possessor of an uncommon knowledge regarding power and society, as well as the agent capable of acting upon this knowledge. In Wright's consciously abstract and metaphysical argument in the novel, the outsiders are agents of change, though not always for the better.

In "Richard Wright and the Art of Non-Fiction," John M. Reilly suggests that *The Outsider* is the expression of Wright's disillusionment with politics. Reilly argues that, in the non-fictional texts relating to the "Third World" that succeed *The Outsider* (*Black Power*, 1954, *The Color Curtain*, 1956, and *White Man, Listen!*, 1957), the completely individualistic philosophy that Wright tested in the character of Cross Damon of *The Outsider* during the time of his "crisis" is superseded by his discovery of the "entry into conscious history" of the "Third World" (519).

Reilly's argument regarding an evolution in Wright's thought beyond the individualism of *The Outsider* to a renewed commitment to politics is certainly plausible. The enthusiasm with which Wright explores the politics of decolonization in the three non-fictional texts of travel is evidence for Reilly's assessment. However, there is also a continuity between the metaphysical meditation of *The Outsider*

and the interpretation of history in the later non-fictional works. This point can be best made by turning to Wright's dedication to *White Man, Listen!* The book is dedicated to Eric Williams, West Indian statesman and author of the book *Capitalism and Slavery*, and to "the Westernized and tragic elite of Asia, Africa, and the West Indies—the lonely outsiders who exist precariously on the clifflike margins of many cultures—men who are distrusted, misunderstood, maligned, criticized by left and right, Christian and pagan—men who carry on their frail but indefatigable shoulders the best of two worlds..." (7).

Like the outsiders of the novel, "the Westernized and tragic elite" of the "Third World" on whom Wright depends for leadership during the process of decolonization, possess privileged access to knowledge. This knowledge is a direct consequence of the elite's existence outside of social structures "on the margins of many cultures." Invoking the metaphor of home at this point, the dedication goes on to describe the elite as "men" who "seek desperately for a home for their hearts: a home which, if found, could be a home for the hearts of all men" (7). Alienation becomes the source not only of knowledge but also of political action of profound historical consequence.<sup>5</sup>

Wright's "tragic elite," we can now see, are ideological exiles. In this they mirror Wright's conception of himself. "I'm a rootless man," Wright tells his reader in the introduction to *White Man, Listen!*, "...I declare unabashedly that I like and even cherish the state of abandonment, of aloneness... it seems to me the natural, inevitable condition of man, and I welcome it. I can make myself at home almost anywhere on this earth..." (17). Living as an expatriate in Paris and exploring the politics of decolonization, Wright discovers in the metaphors of home and exile a semantic field through which to articulate the politics of decolonization. In his own physical and mental condition he finds a connection to the ideological condition of the "tragic elite" of the "Third World." This connection between himself and the "tragic elite" is rendered more meaningful because as a black man Wright, too, exists, in some important respects, outside the ambit of Western culture. Ely Houston, the district attorney, expresses this idea to Cross Damon in *The Outsider* when he suggests that "Negroes as they enter our [American] culture... are going to be both *inside* and *outside* of our culture at the same time" (129, emphasis in text). Discussing the importance of "the outsider" in Wright's later work, Wright's biographer Constance Webb notes, "For many years the theme of the outsider was one of Richard's favorites... These [the outsiders] were the men dangerous to the status quo, for the outsider was one who no longer responded to the values of the system in which he lived" (313).

"Outsider," "home," "exile"—these are some of the key terms that make up the conceptual baggage that Wright takes to the Gold Coast with him in 1953. Explicit evidence of this baggage is found in two earlier titles that Wright suggested for the text that was finally published as *Black Power*. One of the titles was "Stranger in Africa"; the other was "Ancestral Home" (Fabre, *UQ* 401; 404). The two previous titles identify two important dimensions of *Black Power*. Through the discursive economy of the travel narrative, Wright's text brings the "stranger" to his "ancestral home" and suggests a resolution to his experiences there. The shape of this resolution and the details of the economy that produces it are what I propose to examine now.

## 2. The Stranger in His Ancestral Home

Soon after his arrival in the Gold Coast, Wright drives into James Town, the slum section of Accra, with Nkrumah. Here he witnesses from the car some women dancing in a manner that seems strangely familiar to him. "And then I remembered: I'd seen these same snakelike, veering dances before..." Wright tells us. "Where? Oh, God, yes; in America, in storefront churches, in Holy Roller Tabernacles, in God's Temples, in unpainted wooden prayer-meeting houses on the plantations of the Deep South..." Bewildered by this sudden echo from his personal past, Wright is forced to confess, "I'd doubted that I'd be able to walk into the African cultural house and feel at home and know my way around. Yet what I was now looking at in this powerfully improvised dance of these women, I'd seen before in America" (*BP* 56–57).

Thus, Wright confronts early in *Black Power* the question of the meaning of his African ancestry. The semantics of this ancestry are potent territory for Wright. Thinking about the incident of the dancers the next day, he writes, "That there was some kind of link between the native African and the American Negro was undoubtedly true. But what did it mean?" (66). The issue of a connection between Africa and black America comes up often in *Black Power*. In the bus going from Takoradi to Accra, the landscape with its "rich red" soil and black figures going about their work reminds him of the American South (36). In the Old Slave Market Castle in Christianborg, Wright meets Mr. Hagerson who is the descendant of slaves and finds in Mr. Hagerson's features and bearing the reflection of his grandfather (181).

An interesting comparison may be made here with a book by another African-American writer traveling in Ghana. In Maya Angelou's *All God's Children Need*

*Traveling Shoes* (1987), too, there is a scene similar to the one in which Wright recognized his grandfather's features in Mr. Hagerson. *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* is the account of Maya Angelou's stay in Ghana in the early Sixties, about a decade after Wright's own journey to the country when it was still called the Gold Coast.<sup>6</sup> Towards the end of her long stay in Ghana, Angelou travels to a part of the country that she has not been to before. There, in Eastern Ghana, Angelou undergoes two strange experiences. The scene of surprised recognition similar to Wright's occurs on the narrow stairs leading up to the raised market in the town of Keta (203–5). Climbing up the stairs, Angelou is confronted by a woman who mistakes her for the daughter of a friend. When Angelou does not respond to her repeated queries (in Ewe, which Angelou does not understand), the woman begins to get angry. Mr. Adadevo, one of Angelou's companions, has to intervene at this point and Angelou has to produce her California driver's license as evidence of her identity. The woman, finally convinced by the massive force of the California state authority's interpellation of Angelou as a subject, then takes her to be introduced to her friends as the descendant of lost slaves from that region. As the woman leads her up from the dark stairs into the light above, Angelou is astounded to recognize her grandmother's features in the woman's face. Previous to this experience had been another—Angelou's unaccountable disquiet on approaching Keta bridge. As the car approaches the bridge, Angelou begins to get so uneasy that she finally makes the driver stop the car and then walks across the bridge. Once on the other side, Mr. Adadevo asks her if she has heard of the story of the Keta bridge. When she replies in the negative, Mr. Adadevo tells her that until about a century before the bridges in the region were so badly constructed that people were afraid to cross them in any kind of conveyance. Since it was easier in the event of a mishap to reach the other side if you were on foot, the passengers would commonly dismount from the conveyance and walk across (199–200).

The remarkable similarity between the scenes of recognition recorded by Wright and by Angelou does not, however, reflect or lead to a similar interpretation of the scenes by the two writers. For Angelou, who is a traveler to Ghana after Wright, her two experiences in Eastern Ghana become evidence of a fundamental link between herself and her African past that goes beyond the rationalizing ground of "history." This is the implicit message of the incident at the Keta bridge, especially when Angelou experiences a transhistorical, nonpersonal memory in her disquietude upon approaching the bridge.

Considering Angelou's presentation of her link to Africa serves to illustrate the immense difficulty that Wright had experienced previously when faced by the

same issue. The comfort that Angelou finds in the connection is never Wright's. In the conclusion to her book, Angelou writes as she describes her departure from Ghana: "Many years earlier I, or rather someone very like me and certainly related to me, had been taken from Africa by force. This second leave-taking would not be so onerous, for now I knew my people had never completely left Africa" (209). The ground of Angelou's transhistorical link to Africa through "my people" is race and it is precisely race that Wright does not, cannot, have recourse to in his exploration of his link to Africa.

This lack of faith in "race" is explicitly declared by Wright in an exchange that he has with Dr. J. B. Danquah, one of Nkrumah's leading African opponents. When Wright goes to Danquah to set up a time for them to meet, the following exchange takes place, as recorded by Wright:

"How long have you been in Africa?" he asked me.

"About two months," I said.

"Stay longer and you'll feel your race," he told me.

"What?"

"You'll feel it," he assured me. "It'll all come back to you."

"What'll come back?"

"The knowledge of your race." He was explicit.

I liked the man, but not as a Negro or African; I liked his directness, his willingness to be open. Yet, I knew that I'd never feel an identification with Africans on a "racial" basis.

"I doubt that," I said softly. (218-19)

And, indeed, such a feeling of his race—a feeling that Maya Angelou experiences—never does "come back" to Wright in *Black Power*. What does come back is an insight regarding culture. In culture, a ground contained within history, Wright finds the connection between himself as an African-American from Mississippi and the Africans. "The question of how much African culture an African retains when transplanted to a new environment is not a racial, but a cultural problem, cutting across such tricks as measuring of skulls and intelligence tests," Wright notes (266). This is not a surprising resolution of the issue for Wright the rationalist. Wright's Marxist background leads him to look for a historical resolution to the question of the connection between Africa and himself. Successfully countering the seductions of the rhetoric of race, Wright remains a stranger in Africa in a way in which Maya Angelou, who discovers a mystic community through "race," does not.

There are also other, related aspects to Wright's self-identification as a stranger in Africa that we can specify from various comments that he makes in *Black Power*.

Wright the traveler is of the West, as he himself repeatedly insists, and it is his acute consciousness of this aspect of his identity that causes him to adopt the attitude to Africa that he does. Thus in a statement like "Today the ruins of their [the Akan people's] former culture, no matter how cruel and barbarous it may seem to us, are reflected in timidity, hesitancy, and bewilderment," we find Wright ranging himself quite explicitly on the side of the West, addressing a like-minded audience which is of the West (153, emphasis added).

Another scene of dancing, also in James Town, serves to bring home to Wright the Westerner this acute sense of his difference from the Africans. Poking about in the alleyways of that slum area of Accra, Wright discovers a compound in which men and women are dancing in the dark to the beat of drums. "What's going on in there?" he asks a young man who is about to enter the compound. When the young man observes, "You're a stranger, aren't you?" Wright's reply is, "Yes; I'm an American." The young man invites Wright into the compound and Wright observes the dancers "moving slowly, undulating their abdomens, their eyes holding a faraway look." Wright wants to know why they are dancing and is told that a girl has just died. Wright cannot understand this explanation. "I still didn't know why they were dancing and I wanted to ask him a third time," he writes. Some time later Wright leaves, his confusion at the funeral dancers with "no sadness or joy in their faces" uncleared. His final comment on this episode is, "I had understood nothing. I was black and they were black, but my blackness did not help me" (125-7).

A great deal is at stake in this representative passage from *Black Power*. To illustrate better what is at issue here for Wright, we may compare it to another famous confession of incomprehension with regard to Africa. In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad's narrator Marlow is also confronted by a sense of the incomprehensibility of Africa and Africans. Describing at length the jungles of Africa that faced him as he sailed up the river towards Kurtz, Marlow concludes by telling his audience: "The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell?" (37). These two sentences are only the most explicit expression of that constitutive difference between himself and the Africans that Marlow discovers at every turn in "the dark continent."

In these two sentences is revealed a well-rehearsed method of managing alterity in colonial discourse. The radical disjuncture of alterity poses an epistemological problem for Marlow; it presents him with an entity apparently completely beyond the appropriative structure of his consciousness. The particular narrative of his-

tory that Marlow invokes in the same sentence, however, reassigns that constitutive difference-beyond-comprehension that confronts him to a position outside the margins of history. The African is "prehistoric man." What Marlow is telling us in his description of the African scene before him is that the scene is incomprehensible *because* it is prehistoric. History is the knowable, the recognizable, for Marlow; and therefore, in that Western European linear conception of history that begins to acquire especial currency in the late nineteenth century, Africa, which proves itself unknowable, must be outside of history. Marlow believes that the Africans are unknowable because they are prehistoric; I want to venture, however, that it is because Marlow finds them unknowable that he consigns them to a prehistory. In its narrative, *Heart of Darkness* reproduces that economy of colonial discourse which must place Europe and non-Europe, the West and the Rest, metropolis and periphery, in a relationship that achieves the successful assignation of value (historical/cultural/racial) to the first term over the second. By asserting the chaotic incomprehensibility of Africa, Marlow's narrative exiles Africa beyond the margins of ordered human existence. By simultaneously inserting Africa in a structural relationship with Europe, expressed in a linear conception of history, it sets in motion an economy that transfers value to Europe.

Although *Black Power* taken as a whole works towards a less reductive idea of Africa, we may find traces of a similar discursive economy in Wright the Westerner's comments about Africa. Trying to make sense, like Marlow, of the difference of Africa, Wright suggests a resolution that is similar in some ways and different in others. "The tribal African's culture is primally human;" Wright argues in theorizing the relationship of Africans to other peoples, and goes on to add—"that which *all* men once had as their warm, indigenous way of living, is his..." (266). Here, in Wright's idea of the primal or the primitive as some kind of a "common denominator" of humanity, the sense of Marlow's prehistory returns surreptitiously: the African is what all "men" are to some extent. What is left unstated but dangerously implicit is the suggestion that that is all the African is but others, through a process of historical evolution, have become more. This complex rendering of Africa and Africans is Wright's own way of "making sense" of all those incomprehensible details about Africa that confront him again and again. It allows him both to render Africa and Africans as different and to place them in a narrative of world evolution.

Wright's typographical insistence on a community between "all men" reveals his consciousness of how slippery indeed this evolutionary slope is. Yet, like many other Western travelers to Africa before him, he, too, has recourse, in however self-reflexive a manner, to a certain Africanist conception of the continent (a con-

ception that corresponds to what Edward Said has described as the Orientalist conception of Asia). "The distance today between tribal man and the West is greater than the distance between God and Western man of the sixteenth century" declares Wright at one point (117).<sup>7</sup> Such a distance is what Wright both feels acutely as a Westerner himself and tries to overcome as a black man writing about other black people. Wright's Marxist background suggests to him the problems in turning to "race" as a category for explaining his own relationship to Africa. But it is this same Marxist background, perhaps, which also reinforces his linear conception of history. It sets in motion a discursive economy similar to that we have noted in *Heart of Darkness*.

A passage that appears towards the end of *The Color Curtain*, Wright's journalistic report on the 1955 Bandung Conference of "Third World" nations, captures well his conception of the historical role of the West with which he aligns himself. He writes: "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" (185). Here Wright's confidence in the West as the fount of a valued rationality leads him to an open call for Western intervention in the "Third World." A similar apology for Western intervention in Africa is not, in fact, made in *Black Power*, but the idea of the West as the fount of rational thought is very much a part of Wright's narrative of world history in the earlier book as well. Thus, in *Black Power* Wright is often horrified by the examples of religion and superstition that he finds himself confronted with in the Gold Coast. At one point, he records "the pathetic story" of a worker in a gold mine attempting to steal a bar of gold while reciting a magic formula that he thought had rendered him invisible (312-13).<sup>8</sup> At another point, he describes himself as "com[ing] up for air, to take a deep breath..." after going through J. B. Danquah's book on Akan religion with astonished disbelief (218).<sup>9</sup>

In a brief but important scene in *Black Power*, sexual orientation, too, raises the issue of the difference of the Gold Coast for Wright (108-10). At a dance, Wright sees men dancing together in pairs and comes to the horrified conclusion that they are gay. Signifying homosexual practice as Western (without any explanation why), Wright asks himself, "What was *that*? Had I misjudged the African capacity for the assimilation of Western emotional conditionings? ... Had the vices of the English public-school system somehow seeped through here?" (108). His host, however, insists that the men are not gay and that it is common in the Gold Coast for young men to dance with each other in this intimate fashion. The homophobic Wright then comes to the conclusion that "Africa was another world, another

sphere of being... I'd have to learn to accept without thought a whole new range of assumptions" (110). Wright's travel narrative is able to "decontaminate" the Gold Coast of the imputation of homosexuality only by resignifying it, in this instance, as ontologically of a primitive status in relation to the West to which he belongs. Even in its "vices," the West is advanced. The young men's behavior, as Wright's host informs him to his relief, is a result of "tribal conditioning" and not the terrible vice of homosexuality found in Western countries (110).

*Black Power*, then, is the ambivalent travel record of a stranger in his ancestral home. Confronted with the material signifiers of black bodies that visually remind him of his own, Wright struggles with the meaning that his ancestry has for him; and confronted by the "irrationality" of African cultural practice, he has recourse in a complex way to his self-identification as a rational Westerner. In situating himself as both inside and outside both of these collective identities, Wright seems to deconstruct in a superficial reading the essentialisms of both. But this is precisely the point at which a linear conception of history as a movement from irrationalism to rationalism appears in Wright the black Western traveler's discourse to impose a problematic structure upon the relationship between "West" and "Africa." Sometimes, as in the case of the young men whose intimate dancing so disturbs Wright, or in the case of the colonial repression indicted by him, the "advanced" condition of the West is seen as being not necessarily better; but at the same time, the West appears as a rational progression beyond "primitive" superstition and practice. *Black Power* repeatedly describes the contrast between the West and Africa as the difference between rationality and irrationality, science and religion. Indeed, such a contrast between the West and the rest of the world is one of the persistent themes of Wright's later non-fictional works in general. In *The Color Curtain*, for example, Wright declares after surveying the behavior of Asian delegates traveling to the Bandung Conference in the same aircraft as his, "It was rapidly dawning on me that if the men of the West were political [i.e. scientific and rational] animals, then the men of the East were religious animals..." (69).

### 3. Politics in a Land of Pathos

At one point in *Black Power*, Wright describes addressing some Ghanaians at a political gathering held under the auspices of Nkrumah's Convention People's Party. Amongst the words he speaks to his audience are the following: "I'm one of the lost sons of Africa who has come back to look upon the land of his forefathers. In a superficial sense it may be said that I'm a stranger to most of you, but, in terms of a common heritage of suffering and hunger for freedom, your

heart and my heart beat as one" (77). In these words of Wright, we find expressed not only that tension between his identity as a black man and as a Westerner that I have discussed above but also his attempt at a resolution to this tension. There is a hint of the dialectical in the construction of the passage. The first sentence introduces Wright's acknowledgment of a common racial history between himself and his African audience. The beginning of the second sentence, on the other hand, emphasizes the historical gulf between them. Abandoning any attempt to reconcile these two positions or even explain them further, Wright introduces a third position into the discussion. What binds his audience and himself, he says, is "a common heritage of suffering and hunger for freedom." Abandoning both (black) race and (Western) culture, Wright chooses to make his stand on the ground of politics. The passage captures very aptly the trajectory of Wright's argument in *Black Power*. This is the same trajectory that is captured by the history of the title of Wright's text. Discarding such titles as "Stranger in Africa" and "Ancestral Home" (amongst others), Wright finally hits upon "Black Power" as expressing that political sensibility that he so wished to emphasize.

It is possible for us to read *Black Power*, then, as the account of a journey not just into a spatial or cultural but also a political geography. Any travel account involves such a journey, but such a journey into politics is an overtly expressed aspect of *Black Power*. In the opening scene of the text, politics is offered as one of the reasons for journeying to the Gold Coast. It is Dorothy Padmore (wife of West Indian writer and anti-colonialist activist George Padmore) who suggests the Ghana trip to Wright in Paris, after an Easter Sunday luncheon. What immediately occurs to Wright in the four-page long scene that follows is a medley of questions ranging from his African ancestry, to whether Africa was underdeveloped, to curiosity regarding Africa's pagan religion, to the meaning of race. The scene even in its brevity is riven by all those ambivalent tensions which go to make up the text of the book itself and which have led to its contrary assessments. Present in the scene is also the theme of politics, understood as a contest for state power. "Kwame Nkrumah, the Prime Minister, is going to table his motion for self-government in July" is the most important reason that Dorothy Padmore gives Wright for going to Ghana, in attempting to persuade him (9).

At first Wright does not pay much attention to this "political" aspect of a prospective journey to the Gold Coast. "I genuinely wanted to know about the political situation in the Gold Coast," he tells us, "yet another and far more important question was trying to shape itself in me. According to popular notions of 'race,' there ought to be something of me down there in Africa" (10). The scene, however, ends with the political part of the journey foregrounded. Learn-

ing from Dorothy Padmore that there are African cabinet ministers in the Gold Coast with significant responsibilities, Wright makes his final decision to go.

When Wright departs for Africa from Europe, he leaves from Liverpool in England, "the city that had been the center and focal point of the slave trade" (BP 13). The irony of this departure to Africa from Liverpool by a descendant of slaves follows immediately upon the above scene, which itself amends in important ways the premises of colonial travel narratives. If colonial travelers in their roles as adventurers and ethnographers typically profess to pursue material and cultural treasures in colonial territories, Wright departs professing a quest of political treasure. If the economy of *Heart of Darkness*, pursuing and producing cultural "treasure" through its signification of Africa as radically and abysmally different from Europe, transmits value back towards a valorized culture ("English") and valorized place ("London"), *Black Power* through a transformation of such an economy proceeds to accumulate value around a practice ("politics") rather than around a place or a cultural or national identity. Through this emendation, Wright's text revises the conventional protocols of the colonial travel narrative.

But this reading of *Black Power* is complicated by the simultaneous functioning of yet another economy of representation which continues to privilege the West as the site of rationality and secular values in ways I have noted earlier in the chapter. *Black Power* is also a text in which Wright as a Westerner travels from the West to Africa and back. In the functioning of *this* economy the West is the "home" from which Wright sets out on his travel and to which he returns.

Wright's text, then, is a space in which two powerful economies, working in contrary ways, find equal play. The history of the book's title only suggests the economy Wright would like to foreground. The other economy continues to function in the text, and the contrary readings of the book can be attributed to the ambivalent tension within the text because of the simultaneous operations of both economies. In this respect, *Black Power* is both an anti-colonial and a colonial travel narrative.

There are, however, ways in which the operations of the two economies intersect, not to render the ambivalence of the text finally resolved but to hold such ambivalence temporarily in abeyance. The presence of such points of intersection within the text allow it to appear as a coherent, seamless totality to the reader. What is thus brought into being is the semblance of a single meaning. This single meaning, which is put in place by the intersecting economies of the colonial as well as anticolonial travel narratives, bears some detailed examination through attention to the language of the text.

The word "pathos" appears a number of times in Wright's text. The importance of the word is emphasized by the book's subtitle, which is "A Record of

Reactions in a Land of Pathos." Two occurrences of the word illuminate the meaning of the text. One occurrence of the word appears at one of the key moments in the text after Wright, sitting in the galleries, has watched Nkrumah make a speech before the Legislative Assembly "petitioning Her Majesty's Government to enact the necessary legislation for Gold Coast self-government" (169). Witnessing this political act is one of the primary reasons for Wright's journey to the Gold Coast. After the petition, Nkrumah is carried into the celebrating crowd outside. But Wright, watching the scene outside, is apprehensive. He writes: "I could feel the fragility of the African as compared with the might of the British, the naiveté of the African when weighed against the rancid political insight the British possessed, the naked plea of the African when pitted against the anxieties of man holding the secrets of atomic power in their [sic] hands. . . . And a phrase from Nietzsche welled up in me: the pathos of distance. . ." (170). Pathos, it appears from this passage, signifies what Wright perceives as the vast difference between the British and the Africans, a difference worthy of being expressed in the grand metaphysics of Nietzschean language.

Another striking occurrence of the phrase "pathos of distance" only reinforces this particular meaning. Bibiani is a town centered around a gold mine up on a hill. Walking through the town, the sounds of the machinery of the mine audible even down below where "[i]n the mud huts life was being lived by the imperious rule of instinct," Wright comes across "a tall, naked black boy" defecating on "the porch of his hut." Wright's comment on this scene is: "It was clear the industrial activity upon that hill, owned or operated by no matter what race, could not exist without the curbing and disciplining of instincts, the ordering of emotion, the control of the reflexes of the body. Again I felt the pathos of distance!" (310). The distance, the passage makes clear, is between an instinctual, emotional, reflexive life on the one hand and a rational, industrial life on the other.

What makes the distance between the two "pathetic" is the successful and productive repression of one by the other. Clearly rational life is superior to instinctual life, for it has successfully overcome the other in order to create objects such as mining machinery. I have noted earlier that the epistemological vision of Wright as a traveler involves a linear understanding of history. In this context, rational life appears as a more evolved condition than the life of instinct and Wright's "pathos of distance" is seen to have a historical expression.

The word "pathos" appears in a number of different passages in *Black Power*. In all of its occurrences, the word describes the difference, with an implication of inferiority involved, between Africans, on the one hand, and the British or Westerners, on the other. For Wright, the land of pathos is not only the land of emotions



and instincts, but also pathetic in the other, more condescending sense of the term. In *Black Power*, the allusion to "pathos," then, is one more way of constructing "the African" as the Other for the British as well as for Wright himself (in his guise of Westerner). By rendering the Gold Coast "pathetic," Wright assimilates the country and its inhabitants to a powerful Western discourse of alterity.

The history and the politics that are described in *Black Power* may be described as that of a movement from the pre-modern to the modern, from the tribal to the industrial, from the pathetic to the rational. It is in carrying the people of the Gold Coast from the first set of terms to the second that Nkrumah's nationalist revolution, the political phenomenon that Wright has come to bear witness to, is instrumental. The pathos of distance between the two sets of terms is precisely expressed through the rhetoric of distance typically found in the travel narrative. The great geographical distance between Europe and Africa, represented in Wright's narrative of a journey by ship from Liverpool to Takoradi, underwrites the pathetic distance between the two. This distance, it is the business of Nkrumah's revolution to close. It must render the Gold Coast less "pathetic" by focusing authority in the masculine figure of Nkrumah. The nationalist revolution appears then as an overdetermined stage in an evolutionary history.

The single meaning of *Black Power*, brought into being by the play between the twin economies of the colonial and the anti-colonial travel narrative, may now be analyzed in the following manner: the economy of the colonial travel narrative operating through a rhetoric of distance works to produce the Gold Coast as a land of pathos, even as the economy of the anti-colonial travel narrative suggests the Gold Coast may be made to become less pathetic by the politics of revolutionary change. One economy transfers value to the West and the other to the Gold Coast, or at least the politics of the Gold Coast. Through the intersection of these two economies is produced a travel narrative of historical evolution.

#### 4. Conclusion

Kwame Anthony Appiah in "A Long Way from Home: Wright in the Gold Coast" discovers in *Black Power* what he calls a "paranoid hermeneutic" (181). Since Wright discards the comforts of "racial explanation," Appiah argues, he has no reason for being in the Gold Coast and "[b]ecause he has no reason for 'being there,' Wright's reactions seem to oscillate between condescension and paranoia" (180). Appiah finds *Black Power* an ungenerous book in its depiction of the Ghana in which he grew up. Appiah's assessment of *Black Power* is in contradistinction to

that of John M. Reilly whom Appiah describes in his essay as "one of the book's more devoted readers" (176). John M. Reilly in "Richard Wright's Discovery of the Third World," as well as in the already-cited "Richard Wright and the Art of Non-Fiction," arrives at a more positive evaluation of *Black Power*. In "Richard Wright's Discovery of the Third World," Reilly acknowledges the bewilderment Wright exhibits when confronted by "African survivals" in African-American culture and his "ambivalence" (Reilly's word) regarding Western rationality (49). Reilly concludes, however, that "with confidence that Africans can *consciously* enter into historical change, Wright concentrates his attention on the liberating consequences of the escape from dependency on ritual and myth. Whatever else he found in Africa pales beside the renewed hope he gained" (51; emphasis in text). What is important to Reilly is that with the publication of *Black Power*, Richard Wright became an exponent of national liberation (52).

Critics, in response to *Black Power*, have assessed the book positively or negatively depending on whether they have focused on Wright's depictions of Africa and Africans (Appiah) or his overt political expressions (Reilly). My own reading of *Black Power* in this essay reveals how Wright's narrative of travel simultaneously assimilates Africa to a colonial discourse of alterity and liberates it from such a discourse by enthusiastically applauding the cause of national liberation. It also reveals how both these aspects are fundamentally related to each other in Wright's narrative. Mary Louise Pratt in reading *Black Power* as a travel narrative suggests that "in *Black Power* Wright directly set himself to work parodying and reworking the inherited tropology [of the colonial travel narrative]" (*Imperial Eyes* 221). The details of this parodying and reworking are what I have examined in this essay. Noting both the successes and failures of Wright's attempt at transforming the economy of the colonial travel narrative offers a way of assessing the full ambivalent complexity of *Black Power*.

## Notes

### S. Shankar, "Richard Wright's *Black Power*"

1. This essay has benefited from the careful attention of a number of readers. Barbara Harlow, Helena Woodard, Anannya Bhattacharjee, Luc Fanou, Hosam Aboul-Ena, Louis Mendoza, Purnima Bose, Rachel Jennings, Ann Cvetkovich, Barbara Foley, and Luis Marentes especially looked at earlier drafts of this essay and made numerous helpful comments and bibliographic suggestions.

2. In "*Black Power Revisited: In Search of Richard Wright*," Jack B. Moore presents his discoveries from his journey to Ghana some years after Wright. Moore went to Ghana to meet some of the people who appear in *Black Power*. He interviewed James Moxon, Hannah Kudjoe, and Kofi Baako. All three challenge some of what Wright says in *Black Power* about various incidents that took place on his visit. Moore's conclusion based on this (a conclusion he also suggests in "The Art of *Black Power*") is that *Black Power* "is sometimes profitably read as a novel" (185). Moore seems to be working with a certain conventional understanding of fiction and nonfiction in making these comments.

3. "What Is Africa to Me?" was one of the earlier suggested titles for *Black Power*. See Michel Fabre's *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (401). The Countee Cullen poem from which this title is taken continues to appear as an epigraph to the book.

4. The detailed discussion of "economy" as applicable to texts forms a part of my book entitled *Textual Traffic: Colonialism, Modernity and the Economy of the Text* (NY: SUNY P).

5. Wright's faith in the "Westernized elite" of the "Third World" is in stark contrast to the innumerable African writers (such as Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinweizu, to name only a few) who have, on the contrary, expressed deep disillusionment in such an elite. However, it is also true that the careers of most of these writers are later than that of Wright.

6. In this matter of names ("Gold Coast" and "Ghana"), we can find conveniently summarized the relationships between colonialism and nationalism respectively, on the one hand, and

the territory, geographical and otherwise, that they contest, on the other. Colonialism identifies the land by the commodity it produces; nationalism, casting its glance backwards, reclaims a history by reappropriating the name of an ancient kingdom.

7. In this context, see also Wright's story "Man, God Ain't Like That. . . ." In this story, Babu, a superstitious African, takes his white employer John to be God. The story is a critical examination of both European racism and African superstition. Unfortunately, Wright also reproduces some of the Africanist stereotypes regarding Africa in his story.

8. More about this word "pathetic" below.

9. This is not to say that Christianity goes uncriticized in *Black Power*. Wright, in fact, finds the Christianity of the Gold Coast to be anemic when compared to the pagan religion and the instrument of colonialism (132-35).