
Black Power before Black Power: Richard Wright, Africa, and the Bandung Imagination**Fo-Koku D. Woameno**

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Abstract

This article reads Wright's *Black Power* (1954) and *The Color Curtain* (1956) side by side, and finds his impressions of the Gold Coast and Bandung leads him to write a powerful disaffirmative history of anticolonial power. While Wright sees the issue of self-governance for Africans as part of a larger challenge of Afro-Asian peoples to empire, his association of empire-combating peoples is opposed and conditioned by their Americanization and affinity to modernity. This comparative analysis of travel scenes, political commentary and representations of development draws the contrast between solidarity as a practice of negotiation and solidarity as an inevitable outcome of shared racial injury. African involvement in Asian networks and on responses to Wright is matters of scholarship here, correcting the inclination to read Wright as the final authority on the conference. The emergent "Bandung imagination" refers to a shared sovereign space, all the while maintaining the differences of the participants. Wright's accomplishment is to pose enduring questions for diasporic belonging, representation and material self-determination that his categories are not finally determined to answer.

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Introduction

During a trip to the British Gold Coast, in 1953, Richard Wright witnessed the efforts of Kwame Nkrumah and the Convention People's Party for self-government. In 1954 his *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* was released. He then went to the Asian-African Conference in Indonesia the next year and produced *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference*, in 1956. Thus, his book title antecedents the later American movement, called Black Power. That timeline allows for comparisons, but is not a straight intellectual line. Wright also wanted to grasp the nature of political power for people in whose resources, institutions, and conceptions of themselves had been colored by empire.

The two books are often prescribed separate concourses: one on travelling in Africa, the other on Afro-Asian diplomacy. Together, they create an emergent question that evolves over time. Both feature an African American outsider of society travelling to a political arena which he claims a historic legitimacy for being a part of, but to which he cannot claim a representative mandate. They both question the possibility of dealing with race on the basis of solidarity, the possibility of achieving autonomy through independence, and questions the judgments of who will define the modernity of the postcolonial. The "Bandung imagination" in the subtitle refers to Wright's effort to imagine a form of Africa-Asia-diaspora relations free from imperial rule and the Cold War. It doesn't mean there was a Bandung ideology generally, nor does it assume that Wright developed the networks that he watched into a new invention.

The argument revolves around Black internationalism in the plural, not in the singular. Several of the participants in the "AHR Conversation: Black Internationalism" highlight its diverse geographies, traditions and Nationalism affirm that this is the case (Bedasse et al.). The political activism and the thought of pan-Africanism and of black internationalism are connected together and both are considered important by Compaoré (262). This is pertinent to the writer who has no role in organizations involved in fighting for an anti-colonial movement. Wright's contribution is of an interpretive nature, and African and Asian agency is in their own political practices. The book continually alternates between the Gold Coast and Bandung in the aim of gauging his knowledge about affiliation and sovereignty and areas of representation.

Launched across Unequal Histories

The first transformation is one from Wright's voyage to the Gold Coast to an interest in ancestral history and the way this extends to current political considerations. He has several expressions for his desire to see "the crumbling slave castles" (Wright, *Black Power* 6). Their significance for the visitor is emotional and they connect an Atlantic traffic and a Black American life, but do not determine the political agenda of the surrounding contact community. The problem reminds

one of those who traveled from the Americas to Africa, as the journey of return can help bring into view distinct languages, attachments, claims historically. Boutelle's past experience of black internationalism grates a bit with caution. American imperial assumptions might be infused into black American projects targeting Africa even as they reject racial exclusion. For Wright's historical connection, one must review this alongside his granting of authority or interlocutory for Africans.

"Black power" does not help him, and his estrangement comes to a head when he admits, "my blackness did not help me" (Wright, *Black Power*). In another way, the word "my" is combined with "they" in the complete sentence to make the point grammatical: the narrator's identity and his hosts' identities exist alongside each other, but do not become merged. A useful corrective to the assumption of 'right away' intimacy of phenotype. The composition of the travelogue is mediated by the relation of the diasporic Black writer to Africa, as Shankar puts it, and by its "rhetoric of distance" (2), as Cogeanu suggests. There is a group of questions whose answers do not demand that we make a decision on Wright's belongingness. Instead, they focus on how his first-person perspective makes belonging a function of encounters, interpretations and unfulfilled expectation. Tuhkanen also describes Wright's "oneiropolitics", tying the dreaming with the waking into a world that is heterogeneous, but dancer's tactics are not necessarily welcome. In the transnational reading, movement is also customarily situating Alzoubi's readings of the Gold Coast and of Bandung in an expatriate career, one in which the conditions of identity shift without fixing.

At the Bandung Wright it is the opposite: an absence of color. An Indonesian official gives him respect as his own countryman but not to a reporter from a white nation. Wright situates himself self-depreciatingly "between the lines" of being in charge because he knows that he is part of the "master race" (Wright, *Color Curtain*, "Bandung: Beyond Left and Right"). He then declares the mechanism: "It was racism" (Wright, *Color Curtain*, "Bandung: Beyond Left and Right"). The word mastery is highly volatile, for Wright is given a fleeting indulgence by the same appearance that sets him asunder from the American South in the first place. However, this is a first time the account acknowledges the authority/Western correspondent dichotomy, but considers how something called "racial injury" becomes the norm for the new preference. This is an alternative image, but it's alongside the Gold Coast image, and it demonstrates why Wright cannot be a political theorist that rests solely on shared color. In one place, his blackness guarantees nothing – at best it is not enough to provide identification as kin; at worst, it provides it in ways that are ill-warranted. The relevance and the self-explanatory aspect of identity don't exist separately.

Comparisons elucidate Wright's position. African American internationalism is also natural recognition's geography, more in terms of travel, political purpose, and calculation than in nature in Hodder's study of Bayard

Rustin in Africa. In Du Bois's internationalism Hassanzadeh's account of Africa provides an earlier intellectual opposition: Africa can be the subject of a diasporic seeker's recovery or it can come to seem as a player in global politics. The curvilinear flow of Caribbean currents in Black internationalism, and the interwar regional Marxist, anticolonial connections Walsh describes, also save Wright's trip from its becoming a starting point for global Black thought. Rinehart make the case for the continuity between Wright's American subjects and his globalism; the voyage does not somehow merge a national into a global subject. These studies together help define what is singular about Wright, the tension between an urge toward solidarity and a lack of full knowledge of a traveler.

Sovereignty (is) beyond Formal Independence.

At Bandung he sees independent states reminiscing for space to perform in an unequal world; on the Gold Coast Wright sees nationalist movement chasing the transfer of state power. The change-over takes place at the junction of the two books. As creators of state power, they question whether "self-determination" is possible when colonial trading systems, educational institutions, supplies, and diplomatic posting patterns persist in influencing their decision-making abilities. Transnational Africa, as Bush presents it, helps maintain a focus on the African and diasporic aspect of Bandung, and South-South cooperation, as presented by Assie-Lumumba, situates Bandung among the broader movings of people and collaborations to link colonized with formerly colonized peoples. Lumumba-Kasongo then brings it up from the Bandung conference itself, exploring the conference's later geopolitical legacy. This way of thinking obscures a simplistic use of power and the control of a national government. The transition from the struggle for African independence to an international conference provides the focal point for comparison in the article, since Wright first explores the process of nation formation and then investigates the boundaries of statehood in a world of unevenness economic power.

At the time Wright visited the Gold Coast had yet to become independent and the Gold Coast was not a sovereign Ghanaian nation at Bandung. This is an asymmetry that lends to the comparison its historical salience. Both Wright's books examine the struggle of independence movements for recognition from a colonial power and governments with formal authority that are limited in their ability to assert that authority. By imagining the texts as parts of a single, finished decolonial project, this distinction between such political stances would be wiped out. They ask the same question: what is constitutions' influence on the distribution of power outside of what has been stipulated in the constitution?

There is already a similarity in Wright's prose. Talking about the importation of goods and professional training in Indonesia, he mentions what he saw on the Gold Coast (Wright, *Color Curtain*, "Bandung: Beyond Left and

Right”). His suggestion is not empty rhetoric; it is a practical one: a country can kick colonial administrators out of the country without relying on overseas businesses or techniques. Understands that something can be free but without business resources means sovereignty is threatened. Derwanz recapitulates Bandung’s proposals for trade, industrial diversification and development, emphasising the institutional nature of the debates, which often play out purely emotionally, as representative of a racial unity. Faced with that question, which Bandung poses to states, the Gold Coast awaits Wright.

His response continues out-of-touch. Western development can seem the yardstick by which other social arrangements are measured when based on Wright’s problems with technical education and the swiftness of industrial change. This is why it is helpful to look at the various “speeds” of Wright’s thinking, as Tuhkanen puts it: The imperatives to change the conditions of colonialism don’t warrant one history clock. Compare, in the travelogue, how Cogeanu’s self-positioning questions the apparent neutrality of the traveler, and how Shankar’s focus on colonial politics invites us to include the travel narrator in our critical consideration of the ‘description’ itself rather than the ‘promises’ that go beyond it. An institution “opposed to modernization,” like Wright suggests for the African word, is hard to discern in his vocabulary of political decisions and knowledge.

The shared horizon of Pan-Africanism and Black internationalism is defined for Compaoré by “self-determination and solidarity” (263). The reproduction of inherited models of statecraft is not emphasized, but the ability to select and combine. Bandung has even sought to become Africa’s tutor in planning for its development, yet such an assertion may have “deep paternalism” (Derwanz). Within that larger contradiction lies Wright’s prescription of respect, impatience, and respect. A more satisfactory idea of black power available would be that it is a competence in determining the direction of development, the speed of change, and the cooperation an international sphere without being confined to the role of a subject of the subject’s benevolence.

Afro Asian Solidarity and Its Different Makers

The Color Curtain’s attempts to disrupt the monogamous couplement of the United States and the Soviet Union as writers of global politics are of the light-hearted variety. *The Color Curtain* is a party piece in the light-hearted style of disrupting the monogamous coupling of the United States and the Soviet Union as global politics’ authors. However, Wright is so explicit in his use of drama that dictates that the idea of Bandung as one collective subject can take shape. In his carefully provocative title, Bandung Is Done, Prashad cautions against confusing the remembered “symbol” of the diverse programs and antagonisms that generated it. Raphael-Hernandez and Steen select some harsher elements and reject any easy typology to situate Afro-Asian encounters within a broader cultural matrix beyond

any superficial dichotomy between black and white. Mullen brings this history to bear on American literature; Okihiro's story of a Black Pacific emphasizing why a solely Atlantic geography is not sufficient. The strategies aim to make visible the ambit of Wright's imagination, and yet do not give way to that imagination that sees isolated subjects brought together as the colonized.

There is a further dimension in the comparison, due to the problem of language. Wright remarks on the mobilization of opposition to Western power in English, which is a language of the empire. He looks forward to English getting "a new extension of feeling, of moral knowledge" in their mouths (Wright, *Color Curtain*, "The Western World at Bandung"). Here his use of the phrasing gives the former colonized speakers some ability to change instead of receive the inherited medium. But there's a focus once more on the fate of English. The delegates' choice of language also responds to more pragmatic issues of translating, accessing, and convincing listeners who may speak different languages. Communication across difference does not achieve the erasure of the conditions under which difference participants enter the communicative process as Raphael-Hernandez and Steen's account of the Afro-Asian cultural encounters suggests. A lack of familiarity, despite a common race, in the Gold Coast; a common colonial language in Bandung that facilitates communication but not a common political voice.

The involvement of Africans is particularly relevant. In the narration of Bandung, "Africans are staged but [are] not always heard", observes McCann (89). His research takes him on a journey following students and activists across India and Burma, and ultimately, Cairo, documenting the work that goes on at one meeting. Africans "engaged, co-produced and made useable" Afro-Asian political space (McCann 89). Read against that history, Wright is in on something other than just a hindrance. But so is the Gold Coast movement: not simply spectators of Wright's ideas about Africa, the participants are even political agents making an agreement with the British and outside connections.

The literature of Négritude and the institutions and policies of diplomatic meetings did not always coincide but rather became intertwined as, for instance, in Assie-Lumumba's focus on early South-South encounters and the discussion of Afro-Asian themes in Négritude writing. The study of Paul Robeson's connection with Asia by Robinson, or the Afro-Asian literary history created by Mullen, demonstrates other routes that African Americans traveled, encompassing pathways of African American mediation. Wangdila makes Wright's "Bandung imagination" unlikely to become another official name. The aspects of his reportage selectively illuminated a plural field of activism networks, writing and institutional proposals.

Roberts and Foulcher's *Indonesian Notebook* provides the missing third part of the meeting – the reactions of the Indonesians to Wright and documents surrounding the conference. Rather than presume one's impressions can necessarily capture an event, those materials allow them to be considered as a means of

examining exchange. Galafa's insightful formulation of the imagination going "beyond the reaffirmation of Black identity" similarly helps to explain how it is possible to imagine literary solidarities that also added or extended racial belonging without eroding or obscuring the politics of Wright's observation. The genealogical relationships of Mahler from Wright's color curtain to his subsequent tricontinental formations officially give then an afterlife, but a genealogical relationship must be demonstrated not asserted. His comparisons of his two books also warn against the distinction of the moral with the political in terms of solidarity. Asia and Africa did not exist as one political entity, nor did manhood against colonial powers resolve differences over religion, communism, trade or nonalignment.

There is a look at the extent of "before *Black Power*;" the extent of "after *Black Power*." However, Harlem's ties to Addis Ababa and Johannesburg reflect African solidarity in a subsequent American organizing, which is the subject of Brown's study, and Asian martial arts and Black Power reflect an earlier cultural encounter, as discussed by Ho. The latter was not yet described in Wright's book of 1954. It is to explain that the options that had crossed his mind were picked up in different institutional and aesthetic settings. The question isn't whether or not Wright's words foreshadow what's coming but what cross-border practice his writing might envision in its own temporal context.

The Witness and the Limits of Representation.

Both travel books require a strong third party. Wright speaks and shows local events being explained in general terms. What gives him such an authority is seeing a world change, and the counter risk is that the traveler can become so sealed off by his perception that it stifles others with more politics on the world. He is in the good company of Nkrumah, but in the Gold Coast, this doesn't make him a spokesman for the nationalist movement. There he does not have the final say on what the Africa and Asia delegates had meant to say when reviewing the conference papers. This is a problem that is formal as well as ethical: this means that the travel narrative creates continuity between places where the other places may also have their own continuities and with which the narrator is not connected.

The idea of writing a book about Wright's transnational identity is invited by his account in Alzoubi's book, and his treatment of his globalism is welcomed by readers of the latter's book. Mahler Environmental presents a slideshow of Global South solidarities through its history. Those arguments make Wright's travels significant not only as a biography, though they do serve this purpose as well, but also significant because they help tell the story of Indonesia, something Roberts and Foulcher are adamant about. By reading Shankar next to McCann, we sharpen the method: we question how the diasporic traveler has negotiated his relationship with the continent of Africa, and we recover the initiatives of the

African people who have been put at the periphery by his narrative form. That's a way to use Wright as proof, without requiring him to prove that everyone he knows is Wright.

Such challenges did not go away just because of black internationalism. The AHR conversation comments on single-location discussions of the center while Boutelle shows how black projects can pass on imperial habits, and Compaoré requests that African political thought be valued politically. When Wright writes moments of uncertainty, his books are at their best when they are interrupting confident classification. There is no such a thing as a simple homecoming on Gold Coast and no unified block of race on Bandung. In both, it is an observer who is concerned with liberation and who hits his own language's ceiling. There is more to an explanation in that conflict than might be offered by a Wright endorsement or rejection.

Conclusion

Black Power and *The Color Curtain* explore related questions of political agency in a world without colonial administration after colonial power. In Wright's telling of the Gold Coast history, the question posed is: can an African American know a shared grief, without appropriation of the meaning of Africa? In his Bandung report, he wonders if newly empowered governments can achieve cooperation with other governments across difference without relying on the racial hierarchy, being piggybacked by material dependency. The unappealing images of racial forge and the recurring worry of development transport the books more effectively than do their respective geographical labels.

The scholarship of which this is a part, is also modifying the scale of his achievement. The histories of African activism and Indo involvement suggest that Wright was drawn into discussions that he did not initiate; Afro-Asian cultural and artistic histories suggest that Wright's formulations of solidarity undergo different histories and lives. His Bandung imagination can be best understood as the imaginations of an historically-specific attempt to picture a collective sovereignty that cannot determine how the collective will be constituted. The tensions as Wright reads them, do homage to this opening up of their possibility of anticolonial, of repositioning of he-between-themselves authority, which he brought back to the Africans and Asians making them.

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