Cross-Cultural Visions in African American Modernism

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The publication of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* in 1940 marks an epoch in the development of African American literature in modern times. In discussing the historical importance of the book, Irving Howe wrote in 1963, “The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed for ever.” In the abolitionist era, African American writers often addressed themselves to audiences they expected would be largely European American. Before Wright, however, they primarily addressed African American audiences. If they had written for European American audiences, they would have been expected to present stereotyped pictures of African Americans. Exceptions like W. E. B. Du Bois and Charles W. Chesnutt were largely unheeded, for African Americans, as Wright observed, “possessed deep-seated resistance against the Negro problem being presented even verbally, in all its hideous dullness, in all the totality of its meaning.” It was somewhat miraculous that both African and European Americans believed what they read in *Native Son*, in which Wright destroys the white myth of the patient, humorous, subservient black man.

One assumes Wright to be in the tradition of American naturalism. In *Black Boy* (1945), Wright states that he was inspired by Theodore Dreiser’s *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911) and *Sister Carrie* (1900): “It would have been impossible for me to have told anyone what I derived from these novels, for it was nothing less than a sense of life itself. All my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel, and I could not read enough of them.” Such testimony, however, merely tells Wright’s youthful taste in books; it hardly proves that he became a doctrinaire naturalist. To what extent he is part of American naturalism has become an issue about Wright’s work. In *Native Son* does Wright subscribe to the novel’s implicit assumption that American racial conditions are directly responsible for the oppression of African Americans? Recent criticism has modified or refuted the naturalistic reading, suggesting that Wright and his fellow American writers went beyond naturalism.
The pessimistic determinism often associated with naturalism had shown African American writers, such as Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, the meaning of racial oppression. Victims of oppression themselves, these writers by necessity directed their energy toward rebellion. While they escaped the pessimistic outlook of naturalism, their respect for the philosophy of naturalism helped them develop their own versions of human subjectivity and endow their characters with self-determination. Self-pity and rage alone would not have impressed modern readers. As these writers moved beyond anger and protest, they developed a new concern for character and literary discipline, seeking a deeper involvement in the world of philosophy and discourse. Naturalism showed them how to determine the position of human beings in the world; existentialism showed them how to liberate their fellow human beings from the strictures imposed on them.

Naturalism meant that human behavior is solely under the control of heredity and social environment. Just as American realist writers like Mark Twain and Theodore Dreiser had taken issue with naturalistic determinism, African American writers were diametrically opposed to the concept of human subjectivity as demonstrated by a novelist like Emile Zola. In deterministic naturalism, the major character in a novel or an autobiography, falling victim to his or her heredity and social environment, those forces external to the person, fails to achieve his or her subjectivity. With *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Wright proved to the literary public that not only do Bigger Thomas and the young Richard Wright overcome the forces, but they also succeed in achieving subjectivity.

As *Native Son*, *Black Boy*, and their predecessor *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938–39) were making a revolutionary impact on African American literary criticism, Wright was also producing their two subtexts, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937) and *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (1941). These works, involving not only Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin but also liberal critics such as Irving Howe, turned out to be a beginning of the African American literary debate that was to shape the subsequent African American literature. Given a patriotic climate of the war years, *12 Million Black Voices* betrays the tensions between Wright's Marxism and his concept of American democracy. Wright tries to reconcile the modern, industrial working-class culture of African Americans and its subsequent class antagonism with the Popular Front emphasis on the progressive American democracy. “We black folk, our history and our present being,” Wright declares, “are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America is.”

In “Blueprint,” on the other hand, such tensions are absent. Rather than
viewing African American writing in the light of Marxism and class consciousness, Wright tries to define African American modernism in terms of its own themes and points of view. As he theorizes in this manifesto, his own earliest work serves as a model for the African American writer who “is being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die.” Such writing, Wright argues, is endowed with a consciousness that draws on the fluid, historically influential “lore of a great people.” “Reduced to its simplest and most general terms,” he asserts, “theme for Negro writers will rise from understanding the meaning of their being transplanted from the ‘savage’ to a ‘civilized’ culture in all of its social, political, economic, and emotional implications.” By “savage culture,” Wright means the proud origin of black peoples in Africa, as well as the history of slavery in the South.

Even the incipient stage in the development of African American modernism was buttressed by this cross-cultural vision. In “Blueprint,” one of the theoretical principles calls for the African American writer to explore universal humanism, what is common among all cultures. “Every iota of grain in human thought and sensibility,” Wright argues, “should be ready grist for his mill, no matter how far-fetched they may seem in their immediate implications.” Universal humanism, Wright observes, transcends race, class, and culture. The presentation of such cultural and cross-cultural visions “should be simple, yes; but the complexity, the strangeness, the magic, the wonder of life that plays like a bright sheen over the most sordid existence should be there. To borrow a phrase from the Russians, it should have a complex simplicity.”

Like Wright, Ellison was deeply involved with the issues of race, but, as his masterpiece *Invisible Man* (1952) exhibits, Ellison succeeded, with his skill and imagination, in making what is racial and regional into what is humanistic and universal. At the outset of his career, following Wright’s lead in Marxism, as stated in “Blueprint,” Ellison also argued that the rhetorical and political devices of proletarian fiction were the means by which to advance a radical black literature. His first publication, a review of Waters Edward Turpin’s *These Low Grounds*, appeared with “Blueprint” in *New Challenge* in 1937, closely reflecting Wright’s views: the African American racial or nationalist expression by a Marxist writer entails an inherent class consciousness.

A series of book reviews Ellison published in *New Masses* in 1940 still reflected a Marxist perspective as defined in “Blueprint.” In “Stormy Weather,” a review of Langston Hughes’s autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940), Ellison tried to make Hughes the chief spokesperson of the literary movement that distanced itself from the accommodationist aesthetics of the Harlem Renaissance and leaned toward a revolutionary black literature.
Ellison assailed the New Negro writers as proponents of a black middle class which had become self-conscious through the economic alliances it had made in supporting World War I. The work of the New Negro writers was politically influenced by the black middle-class interests and failed to express the painful experiences of the black masses. Ellison realized that “white faddists” were perpetuating the image of the black American as “primitive and exotic,” a deceptively racist perception that signifies the spiritual and moral decay of the postwar period. It looked as though the same white men were paying these African American writers to contain the working-class militancy prompted by the riots and lynchings during World War I by championing the passive black middle class.

Wright and Ellison were trying to lure Hughes, the leader in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, to their camp under the banner of Marxist and proletarian writing. During the 1930s, as his well-known poems such as “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921), “The Weary Blues” (1926), and “I, Too” (1932) powerfully expressed the deep-seated feelings of the African American masses, Hughes’s voice resounded with those of Wright and Ellison. Of the three, Wright was the only one who was formally and actively involved in the activities of the Communist Party, attending the John Reed Club meetings. However, not only were all three comrades in action; they were also united in the cause of African American modernism.

By the time his 12 Million Black Voices appeared in 1941, Wright was still interested in Marxist theory but became disenchanted with its practice by the American Communist Party. Similarly, Ellison’s enthusiasm for Marxism began to decline. Instead of relying on Wright’s Marxist views and democratic principles, expressed in 12 Million Black Voices, Ellison’s theory of the black folk focused on a transformation of African Americans from their Southern roots to the Northern industrial environment. As his reviews in the early 1940s indicate, Ellison ultimately disputed with Wright, who predicted in 12 Million Black Voices that the folk in the city would decline and that a working-class and “modern” consciousness would rise. Ellison’s writings also intimate his opposition to Gunnar Myrdal’s sociological study, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy (1944). Ellison questioned Myrdal’s premise that “blackness” in American culture is the result of white oppression. Myrdal tried to demonstrate that this “blackness” is “a distorted development” and “a pathological condition” of American culture. Myrdal posits that while European Americans resolve the problems of race, African Americans will be assimilated into American culture.

Wright, on the other hand, revisiting his Chicago school of sociology, was drawn to Myrdal’s study. By 1945, attempting to reinvent himself from a
post-Marxist point of view, Wright agreed with Myrdal in rejecting a Marxist analysis of racial problems in America. As his introduction to St. Clair Drake's and Horace Cayton's *Black Metropolis* (1945) indicates, Wright supported Myrdal’s observations of African American culture: a large African American population is defeated by its “crude and brutal” experience in the industrial North. By contrast, Ellison saw African Americans’ ability and will to create cultural forms: folklore, art, music, and literature. For Ellison, African American cultural forms also subsume the critique of Myrdal’s “higher” American culture and the rejection of “white patterns.” Calling for deeper cultural forms than those sociologists and Marxists had found, Ellison found them in the emerging culture of the black working folk in the industrial North. He argued that the cultural forms of the black dance halls in the Northern cities—the blues, jazz, dance, and dress—were proof of modern African American culture: the traditional folk culture existing in the present, as Invisible Man declares that “a whole unrecorded history is spoken.”

Despite their differences in perspective as evident in the early 1940s, by the mid 1940s Wright and Ellison had come to share the fundamental tenets of African American culture. The fruits of their labor were shown in their respective writings in the war years and the late 1940s, but modern African American literature reached its apogee with the appearance of Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945). It is this book, subtitled *A Record of Childhood and Youth*, that not only Ellison and his fellow African American writers but a host of modern European American writers like Dreiser praised and regarded as a model of writing. Ellison disagreed with Wright in theory but agreed with him in practice.

Today *Black Boy* is acclaimed not only as the finest autobiography written by an African American but as one of the finest autobiographies written in America. In fact, many American autobiographies are ethnic and cross-cultural. As *Black Boy* discusses the experience of an African American youth who grew up in the South, Dreiser’s *Dawn* (1931) treats the life struggle that the son of a German immigrant faced in the North. Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* (1771–90) is not ethnic in the usual sense of the word, but as an important cross-cultural document for the young nation, it directly concerns American and European cultures. Franklin’s life exemplifies the American dream of a poor boy who made good in Pennsylvania, an English colony. What these autobiographies have in common is not only an eloquent portrayal of early life but a poignant expression of cross-cultural visions.

From another perspective, Wright’s portrayals of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* and the young self in *Black Boy* thrive on what Mikhail Bakhtin called “a dialogic imagination.” As Wright explains in his introduction to *Native Son,*
“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” the hero of the novel does not merely express his subjectivity; he is representative of all others like him. In *Black Boy*, Wright uses the young self as a mask: the attitudes and sentiments expressed by the young Wright are not totally his own but represent the responses of those he calls “the voiceless Negro boys” of the South. The liberal critics were all in agreement that the book’s chief value lies in leading the nation on the road to emancipation. Of all the reviews, Lionel Trilling’s “A Tragic Situation” was most thorough. Granted, *Black Boy* was a most accurate account of misery and oppression published to that date, but Trilling observed that the book does not let its readers make “the moral ‘escape’ that can be offered by accounts of suffering and justice.” What underlies the power and effect of Wright’s book is not his personal experience, but his moral and intellectual power, as derived from others by dialogic imagination. Trilling suggested that Wright “does not make himself that different kind of human being, a ‘sufferer.’ His is not an object, he is a subject; he is the same kind of person as his reader, as complex, as free.” What Trilling meant by “a subject” is an individual free of the ego of the subject, an individual representative of all others. Paradoxically, Wright converts the concept of subjectivity to that of objectivity: what Bigger Thomas or the young Wright expresses as the subject is what anyone like him does. Bakhtin theorized and demonstrated, as did Lacan, that the subject is not unique, nor is it different from the other.

In the development of modern African American fiction, the early 1950s marks an important turning point. Ellison’s *Invisible Man* thrives on a set of symbols with conscious allusions to American history and ideology. Ellison’s vision, like Wright’s, is not that of Invisible Man, the subject, but is representative of others. Like *Black Boy*, *Invisible Man* is deeply concerned with the development of an African American youth into maturity. Evoking the name of Ralph Waldo Emerson suggests Ellison’s serious concern with W. E. B. Du Bois’s sense of double-consciousness, what Ellison calls himself in an essay “a Negro and an American, a member of the family and yet an outsider.” In search of identity in American society, however, Ellison’s vision focuses not only on broader culture and history, but on deeper self-realization. Wright’s less successful *The Outsider* (1953), on the other hand, is considered an existential novel, which was in vogue in Europe in the aftermath of World War II. In contrast to French existentialists like Sartre and Camus, Wright is as profoundly concerned in this novel with the dilemma of double consciousness as is Ellison in *Invisible Man*. But, portraying the highly educated, mature intellectuals, Cross Damon and Invisible Man, both novels express the goal of modern African American novelists whose efforts have been to make their characters representative of others and universalize their cultural visions.
A third major African American novel, appearing in the early 1950s, James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), portrays Baldwin’s early life replete with personal, familial, racial, and social turmoil, a raw experience that is mute in *Invisible Man* and *The Outsider*. Although Baldwin held in the highest regard Wright’s *Black Boy* and Ellison’s *Invisible Man* among African American books, he emulated Dostoevsky for his dialectic technique and Henry James for his impressionism. Baldwin met Wright, who, reading part of the manuscript of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, encouraged him. This novel, much like *Black Boy*, is an autobiographical portrait of John Grimes, an African American youth in search of identity in racist society. Distinct from *Black Boy*, however, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* creates, in particular, the protagonist’s sexual identity and guilt, as well as his ambivalent relationships with his parents.

Baldwin’s most influential social and literary criticisms are collected in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955). Focusing on the problems of race in American society, he discusses literature of anti-slavery from Stowe to Wright, as well as his own experiences in America and Europe. Earlier Baldwin regarded Wright as his mentor but soon rebelled against him. Calling Bigger Thomas a descendant of Uncle Tom, Baldwin argued that *Native Son* “suggested a revolution of racial conflict that was merely the liberal dream of good will in which blacks would obliterate their personalities and become as whites.” Baldwin disagreed with Wright’s use of violence, which he called “gratuitous and compulsive because the root of the violence is never explained.” Baldwin applauded Wright’s courageous representation of the African American “rage,” but to him the novelist must analyze raw emotion and transform it into an identifiable human experience. Baldwin’s second novel, *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), like *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is his major achievement. Although *Giovanni’s Room* was not written in the tradition of literary naturalism, it represents the author’s attempt to write a Zolaesque experimental novel. Baldwin focuses on real characters taken from life: David, a bisexual white American; his fiancée Hella, a white American; and Giovanni, David’s male homosexual lover. The story closely represents Hella’s painful discovery of a mystery of human sexuality. *Another Country* (1962), a controversial novel, is nonetheless his most ambitious work. Whereas his experiment in *Giovanni’s Room* involves only white characters and society, *Another Country* conducts an experiment on a variety of interracial and sexual relationships. *Another Country* comprises the four narratives interrelated at certain points in the novel. Most of the events are perhaps too carefully arranged, but Rufus’s tragic suicide and Vivaldo and Ida’s reconciliation are depicted with great compassion and understanding. Like Wright’s and Ellison’s novels, Baldwin’s also thrive on a dialogic imagination that derives from the clashing interactions between the subject and others.
Two of Baldwin's later novels, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), both explore the life of an African American artist. *Tell Me* is autobiographical, like Wright's *Black Boy*, and is lacking in precipitous events and actions, but through flashbacks it subtly conveys harrowing experiences of a middle-aged actor. *Beale Street*, unlike Baldwin's other novels, explores heterosexuality. This novel celebrates the love relationship of an African American couple consciously aware of the primacy of love over any racial or social obstacles and able to revive their genuine relationship and attain their deliverance. The ultimate domain of love, as Baldwin has shown throughout his work, is governed by the individuality of two human beings' deepest emotions that transcends their sexual orientation. Baldwin showed with all his heart and soul, as his American predecessors had scarcely done, that homosexuality is just as normal as is heterosexuality: here lies his greatest contribution to modern American fiction.

In subject matter and form, African American modernism, represented by Hughes, Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin, has an affinity with Anglo-American modernism. In fact, both groups of writers sought traditions, myths, and legends. In *The Waste Land* (1922), T. S. Eliot adapts the symbolic framework of the medieval Grail legend and other older fertility rites in contrast to the sordidness and sterility of modern life in the West. In creating Yoknapatawpha County, William Faulkner ponders the rise and fall of the genteel culture of the old Civil War South. For their subjects, Hughes and Wright respectively enlightened their heritages in an ancient river like the Congo and an ancient kingdom like the Ashanti and their religiosity and cosmology. For their techniques and styles, Hughes and Ellison both emulated the spirit, lyricism, and individualism that characterize the evolution of African American music from spirituals and gospel through the blues to jazz. Modern jazz today is a cross-cultural hybrid of African American and Western music.

One of the striking differences between Anglo-American and African American modernists has much to do with their attitudes toward their crafts. Hughes, for instance, advocated an aesthetic of simplicity and, like Whitman, voices of democracy. All in all, African American modernists shunned an elitist attitude which Western modernists at times betrayed. George Orwell deplored Western modernists' indifference to content and their preoccupation with form. “Our eyes,” he wrote, “are directed to Rome, to Byzantium, to Montparnasse, to Mexico, to the Etruscans, to the subconscious, to the solar plexus—to everywhere except the places where things are actually happening.” This formalism in the 1920s was regarded by many as the logical aesthetic for modernist writing. Western modernists believed that their art
offers a privileged insight into reality and at the same time, because art creates its own reality, it is not at all concerned with commonplace reality: art is an autonomous activity.

While Anglo-American modernists like Pound, Eliot, Hemingway, and Faulkner conveyed their personal, subjective visions with privileged sensibility, African American counterparts like Hughes, Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin, as well as later African American writers such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, were intent on conveying their universal visions, their worldviews informed of other cultures. Despite the sentiments of fragmentation and alienation that both groups of American writers generated, they tried to redeem themselves through the creation of art. Man acts, as Heidegger observed, “as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact, language remains the master of man. Perhaps it is above all else man’s subversion of this relation of dominance that drives his nature into alienation.” To overcome alienation, postmodernists have attempted to integrate themselves with the worlds of others, the phenomena taking place in other fields of knowledge and in other cultures and traditions. If modernism is characterized by shifting the burden of knowledge from the rational to the aesthetic, postmodernism is viewed as refining the rational in terms of the phenomenal. While modernism, especially Western modernism, smacks of elitism, postmodernism, as shown by the later Wright, Walker, and Morrison, is widely concerned not only with the mundane but also with other kinds of knowledge and other cultures. The postmodern characteristics attributable to late Wright, Walker, and Morrison, however, are radically different from those of the postmodern texts by such writers as Amiri Baraka and Ishmael Reed.

As most postmodernists try to situate themselves in the contemporary world, some modernists gauge their world in relation to past culture. To Eliot, present culture is an embodied experience of the present arising from the contiguous transformation of the past. Most modernists are opposed to absolute polarities in human experience. Victorians and some early modernists like Henry James and W. B. Yeats, by contrast, had a penchant for the dichotomy of masculine and feminine, object and subject, the higher and the lower, the earlier and the later, present and past, time and place. On the contrary, late modernists like James Joyce, and postmodernists in particular, explore the notion of integrating the opposites. They view the opposites as convenient ways of discussing present phenomena, which, upon closer observation, reveal themselves to be related to one another or to be functions of one another.

Postmodernists, moreover, tend to parody past art, refrain from all
absolutes, and deconstruct established images and ideas. Unlike Pound, who in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” laments over a culture filled with “mendacities” and “the classics in paraphrase,” a postmodernist is inclined to deal with copies more seriously than with originals. As a deconstructor, a postmodernist is fascinated not by the signified but by their “free signifiers.” Postmodern writers, as in contemporary visual arts, refuse to acknowledge any limits to the world of imaginary representation, whether it is a psychologically autonomous entity or a physically constructed realm fully integrated with the world of historical experience. The predominant modes of postmodernism are not as controlled and disciplined as those of modernism: the postmodern modes of expression tend to be ironic, parodic, digressive, and complex.

The hermeneutic reading of the text, however, eventually manifests the fundamental difference between the two modes of writing. As most critics have noted, postmodernism is characterized by the decentered text. The postmodern text deals with oppositions, what Jacques Derrida calls *différance*. In each signifying text, internal conflicts develop independently of the author, the supposedly central informant. Consequently the text deconstructs itself because of the oppositional and conflictual nature of language. Because the *différance* is at work in the text, the author, let alone the reader, can scarcely claim absolute authority over a given text; hence there arises a structural impossibility of imposing a central idea, a summary, or a conclusion to the text. It is for this reason that many postmodern texts incorporate segments of mass culture and late capitalism and draw on parodic forms in order to minimize autonomy, self-referentiality, and centralized vision. Postmodern texts, then, are said to denote a fundamental loss of rational and ontological certainty.

The lack of center and the recognition of gaps and oppositions that characterize the postmodern text suggest that postmodernists are bent on abolishing marginality and extending referentiality in their text. As postmodern texts, such as Wright’s *The Color Curtain* (1956) and Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1989), reveal, their visions and dialogues have come to include relations not only between East and West, Old and New, but between the First, Second, and Third Worlds within as well as across national cultures. The conflict between Rushdie’s postmodern satire and the ancient Muslim dogma, as fictionalized in *The Satanic Verses*, and the clash between left and right, race and religion, as depicted in *The Color Curtain*, are dramatic examples of postmodern cross-culturalism, just as are the recent international challenges to South African apartheid and ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. This cross-culturalism, however, finds its origin in a much earlier period. One of
the idiosyncrasies of Victorian thought was Western chauvinism. As late as the middle of the twentieth century, as Wright argued in *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (1954), the West was perceived as an advanced culture while Africans were regarded as primitive. Victorian intellectuals respected Chinese and Indian societies, which represented ancient cultures, but they considered these societies decadent and backward. Rudyard Kipling deemed it the moral duty of the West to help the nonwhite races of the world.

More recently, postmodernist critics in the West, such as Roland Barthes and Derrida, have viewed Japanese culture as decentered. Because they define modernist writing as structural, systematic, and rational, they theorize that Japanese culture is essentially postmodern. Barthes argues and illustrates that Japan is a decentered culture in which the Buddhist state of *mu*, nothingness, represents the lack of a privileged *Signified* behind what he calls the “empire of signs.” Modernism, as well as romanticism, suppressed a decentered culture and the very margins in a culture which have come to gain power in postmodernist writing. Such margins are converted to signs of power, and these signs are used to reshape the ostensibly fixed material world of history and produce new and more humane identities for human beings.

As a result, the power of language in postmodernism operates in contrast to the function of language in realism. Realistic language, which functions as a mirror, conveys a common view by suppressing contradictory voices; it reflects the commonly experienced world outside the text. That is, experience is prior to language. In postmodern writing, language, though often derived from experience, has its own power and development independent of experience. Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), for example, shows that Celie's voice realistically echoes racist experience but simultaneously reflects what Wright calls in *Black Power* “a primal African attitude.” Celie laments that cutting a young tree is like cutting her own arm. Walker's text is reminiscent of Wright's: Wright was fascinated by the African reverence for nonhuman beings, a primal African philosophy that corresponds to the Buddhist belief. Both *The Color Purple* and *Black Power* as postmodern texts poignantly express the cross-cultural vision that humankind is not at the center of the universe.

Another postmodern text conducive to a cross-cultural reading is Wright's *Pagan Spain* (1957). In this text, anomalies appear on the surface of the text: Spain looks like a Christian as well as a Pagan society. Wright's discourse conveys such a message on the surface, but on the same surface it contains anomalies, or “gaps,” which, when taken into account, are found to conflict with and put into question what is signified. These gaps exist on the virtual margins of the text, but as the reader focuses on the gaps, the text begins to
deconstruct itself. The gaps spread and immerse themselves throughout the
text. For example, the Black Virgin at Montserrat, an established symbol of
Catholicism, becomes a powerful signifier, a text that systematically decon-
structs itself before the reader’s expectant eyes. In sharp contrast to the male
principle of life, for which Christianity stands, Spanish religiosity underscores
the female principle of life the Virgin signifies.

Such a reading leads to the basic assumption of a feminist criticism that
there are innate differences between men and women and, further, that
women are inherently superior, as Pagan Spain reveals that Spanish women
are the pillar of Spanish culture. Julia Kristeva, a contemporary champion of
feminist writing and a follower of Lacanian psychoanalysis, was fascinated
with medieval Chinese womanhood when she visited northern Chinese vil-
lages in the late 1980s, just as Wright admired Spanish womanhood when he
traveled to Spain in the mid 1950s. A postmodern reading of Pagan Spain, then,
is to restore the matriarchal power in an earlier culture, which merely
existed in the margins of the premodern text. Not only has postmodern writ-
ing subverted the premodern text by shifting the margins to the center of the
text, but the decentric mode of writing has also produced the effect of col-
lapsing and destroying the time-honored oppositions: male and female, fact
and fiction, civilized and indigenous, colonial and postcolonial, East and
West, America and Europe.

The most influential East-West artistic, cultural, and literary exchange that
has taken place in modern and postmodern times was reading and writing of
haiku. Among others, Richard Wright distinguished himself as a haiku poet
by writing over 4,000 haiku in his last eighteen months of his life while in
exile in Paris. Between Wright’s death in 1960 and the publication of Haiku:
This Other World (1998), a collection of the 817 selected by Wright, only
twenty-three of them had appeared in some journals and books, but the
entire manuscripts of Wright's haiku have been available for study since
1990. Since 1998, in particular, Wright's haiku have made an impact on
some of the contemporary American poets, most notably Robert Haas, Sonia
Sanchez, and James Emanuel. Robert Haas, U.S. Poet Laureate 1995–97,
wrote in The Washington Post: “Here’s a surprise, a book of haiku written in
his last years by the fierce and original American novelist Richard Wright. . . .
What an outpouring!”

Back in 1955 Wright attended the Bandung Conference of the Third
World; two years later he was a member of the First Congress of Negro Artists
and Writers, which met in Paris in September. During that same period he
liked to work in his garden on his Normandy farm, an activity that supplied
many themes for his haiku. Of his experience in this period, Wright’s travel
to the newly independent Ghana in West Africa had a great impact on his writing of haiku. The African philosophy of life Wright witnessed among the Ashanti, “the African primal outlook upon life,” as he called it, served as an inspiration for his poetic sensibility.

The decade of the 1950s was rich in possibilities for Wright. The Third World was coming into its own artistically, socially, and politically. But set against this positive cultural climate were the effects of his financial and personal problems. By the beginning of 1959 he was sick and confined to his bed. In the introduction to *Haiku: This Other World*, Wright’s daughter Julia Wright, then an eighteen-year-old Sorbonne student of sociology, writes:

But, the wound that went the deepest, the piece of news that hit him by far the hardest, was the death of his mother, Ella, in January 1959, the very same month a writer he highly admired, Albert Camus, was killed in an automobile accident. . . . The haiku enabled him to mourn a mother whose physical absence from his life had begun way before her death. . . . A form of poetry which links seasons of the soul with nature’s cycle of moods enabled him to reach out to the black part of himself still stranded in a South that continued to live in his dreams. With the haiku, a self-nurturing could begin albeit so close to his own death.

Wright was approaching the end of the decade in an ambivalent mood ready for union with that which lies beyond the artist, a theme appropriate for haiku. Exhausted by his sickness and the polemic drain on his rational powers, he was mentally and emotionally receptive to the ideas, beauty, and form of haiku under the influence of R. H. Blyth and his Zen concepts, as well as of African philosophy.

Unlike the other sects of Buddhism, Zen teaches that every individual possesses Buddhahood and all he or she must do is to realize it. One must purge one’s mind and heart of any materialistic thoughts or feelings and appreciate the wonder of the world here and now. Zen is a way of self-discipline and asceticism. Its emphasis on self-denial is derived from the prophetic admonishment Gautama Buddha is said to have given to his disciples: “Seek within, you are the Buddha.” Zen’s emphasis on self-enlightenment is analogous to Emersonian transcendentalism, in which an individual is taught to discipline the self and look within, for divinity resides not only in nature but in human beings.

In contrast to Zen, however, Emerson defines human enlightenment as the subject’s consciousness of the over-soul. In “The Over-Soul,” Emerson describes this state of mind as a boundless sphere in which “there is no screen
or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens.” No sooner does the consciousness of the subject disappear than the over-soul appears on the scene. As Emerson writes, “[M]an, the effect ceases, and God, the cause, begins.” To Emerson, the over-soul is so pervasive “a light [that it] shines through us upon things and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all.” In his essay “Nature,” this light is so powerful that one becomes “a transparent eyeball” which cannot see beyond one’s state of mind. In Zen, one is taught to annihilate this eyeball before satori is attained: satori is the achievement of mu, nothingness. The state of nothingness is free of human subjectivity; it is so completely free of any thought or emotion that such a consciousness, or “the unconscious” in psychoanalytical terms, corresponds to the state of nature. Unlike a Zen master, Emerson seems to empower God to conquer human subjects while allowing them to cling to their subjectivity.

In Zen, if the enlightened person sees a tree, for instance, the person sees the tree through his or her enlightened eye. The tree is no longer an ordinary tree; it now exists with different meaning. In other words, the tree contains satori only when the viewer is enlightened. From a similar point of view, Wright saw in African life, as reported in Black Power, a closer relationship between human beings and nature than that between human beings and their social and political environment:

Africa, with its high rain forest, with its stifling heat and lush vegetation, might well be mankind’s queerest laboratory. Here instinct ruled and flowered without being concerned with the nature of the physical structure of the world; man lived without too much effort; there was nothing to distract him from concentrating upon the currents and countercurrents of his heart. He was thus free to project out of himself what he thought he was. Man has lived here in a waking dream, and, to some extent, he still lives here in that dream.

Africa evokes in one “a total attitude toward life, calling into question the basic assumptions of existence,” just as Zen teaches one a way of life completely independent of what one has been socially and politically conditioned to lead. As if echoing the enlightenment in Zen, Wright says: “Africa is the world of man; if you are wild, Africa’s wild; if you are empty, so’s Africa.”

Wright’s analysis of the African concept of life is also suggestive of Zen’s emphasis on transcending the dualism of life and death. Zen master Dogen (1200–1254), whose treatise Shobogenzo is known in Japan for his practical application rather than his theory of Zen doctrine, observed that since life and death are beyond human control, there is no need to avoid them. Dogen’s
teaching is a refutation of the assumption that life and death are entirely separate entities as are seasons or day and night. To Freud, the unconscious includes a death instinct, an instinct in opposition to libido—an instinct to turn into elements in opposition to reproduction of organisms. To Lacan, the death instinct is not “an admission of impotence, it isn’t coming to a halt before an irreducible, an ineffable last thing, it is a concept.” Lacan takes issue with Freud, for Freud defines death as the opposite of life: the pleasure principle underlying life is opposed to the death wish, which “tends to reduce all animate things to the inanimate.” Lacan, on the other hand, defines this change from life to death as “human experience, human interchanges, intersubjectivity.” Lacan’s concept of death, then, has a strong resemblance to Dogen’s.

The funeral service Wright saw in an Ashanti community, reported in Black Power, showed him that “the ‘dead’ live side by side with the living; they eat, breathe, laugh, hate, love, and continue doing in the world of ghostly shadows exactly what they had been doing in the world of flesh and blood,” a portrayal of life and death reminiscent of Philip Freneau’s “The Indian Burying Ground” and, more recently, Toni Morrison’s Beloved. In Freneau’s poem, the Native Americans bury their dead in a sitting posture. Like the dead Ashanti, the buried man continues to be involved in his life activities after death: “His imaged bird, and painted bowl, / And venison, for a journey dressed, / Bespeak the nature of the soul, / Activity, that knows no rest.” Freneau’s images, like haiku images, function as representations of intersubjectivity instead of subjectivity. The dead man’s “imaged birds, and painted bowl” do not convey Freneau’s ideas, although these images are what Freneau as a subject sees. Because the images express the Indian’s ideas, the images constitute the reflections of another subject.

Wright was, moreover, fascinated by the African reverence for the nonhuman living, a primal African attitude which corresponds to the Buddhist belief. He observed in Black Power that the pre-Christian African, like a Buddhist, was impressed with the littleness of a human being. The concept of unity, continuity, and infinity underlying that of life and death is what the Akan religion and Buddhism share. Wright’s reading of the African mind conforms to both religions in their common belief that not only are human beings unable to occupy the center of the universe; they are merely an infinitesimal fraction of time and space. The Akan religion and Buddhism both de-emphasize human subjectivity. It is this revelatory and emulating relationship which nature holds for human beings that makes the African primal outlook upon life akin to Zen Buddhism.

With the advent of postmodern writing, American culture with its economic and political influences across the shores is bent on Americanizing the
world but at the same time is trying to globalize it. Perhaps the most positive lesson of the cross-cultural visions, as strongly reflected in African American literature, is that seeing human existence can be achieved in ways which do not necessarily assert the self by excluding the other: truth is often a revelation from the other. However historically different their ideas and representations may have been, both African American modernists and postmodernists have mediated upon the possibility of multiple worlds for human subjectivity.