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De-Occidentalized “Projections in the Haiku Manner”: Poetics of Indeterminacy and Transcultural Reconfiguration of “Frog Perspectives” in Richard Wright’s Last Poems

*Michio ARIMITSU**

A world of grief and pain:
Flowers bloom;
Even then . . .
—Kobayashi Issa, *Hachiban nikki*, 1819

When the feeling and fact of being a Negro is accepted fully into the consciousness of a Negro, there’s something universal about it, something saving and informing, something that lifts it above being a Negro in America. Oh, will I ever have the strength and courage to tell what I feel and think; and do I know it well enough to tell it.

—Richard Wright, journal entry, February 12, 1945

INTRODUCTION: TRANSNATIONALIZING RICHARD WRIGHT

Prior to the posthumous publication of *Haiku: This Other World* in 1998, most of the three-line poems that Richard Wright (1908–60) had produced, only months before his untimely death in France, remained largely forgotten. Out of over 4,000 of these gem-like poems—he called them “projections in the haiku manner”—the African American poet had himself

*Associate Professor, Keio University

picked 817 and painstakingly revised them while battling his illness, only to have his prospective publisher reject the final manuscript.¹ Many of Wright's haiku-inspired poems (all numbered but untitled) are vivid and humorous snapshots of nature, while others present evocative interactions of human beings with their natural or urban environment. From sparkling moments of joy and surprise to ruminations on loneliness, poverty, illness, and death, these poems register and evoke a remarkably wide range of emotions and thoughts.

Projection 630, for instance, presents a humorous dialogue between human beings and nature:

For each baptized,
The brown creek laughs and gurgles,
Flowing on its way.

Embodying cultural hybridity, this poem successfully uses the 5–7–5 syllabic structure to recapture the Southern rural landscape of Wright's childhood, where many African Americans were baptized in rivers, swamps, and lakes. This jubilant projection in the haiku manner may surprise the readers of Wright's earlier fiction and cultural criticism. Wright's humorous celebration of religiosity in the wild here contradicts his controversial (and duly criticized) views, not only of religion as an impediment to progress and modernization, but also of the American South as a hell-like place of fear and despair.

Rendered in a style that insists on its foreignness, this projection in the haiku manner is also fascinating, as its context-shedding brevity translocalizes the image. Though this poem seems to refer to the African American sacred ritual, there is no guarantee that those being baptized in the scene are all black or American. For all we know, the creek could be anywhere, from the Mississippi of Wright's childhood to the Jordan River, where Christ himself was baptized. The readers might interpret this poem (and by extension, Wright's other adaptations of haiku) as an allegory of Afro-Asian unity or a pictorial illustration of his cosmopolitanism, as we are invited to envision a grand river downstream where cultural tributaries flow together into—in the words of W.E.B. Du Bois—a translocal “kingdom of culture” beyond race and nation.²

In this article, I explore the contemporary relevance of Wright's global imaginings by juxtaposing his antiracist, anticolonial writings with his late poetry inspired by haiku. In an age when critical terms such as “hybridity,”

“border-crossing,” and “transculturalism” have become the sine qua non of literary scholarship, Wright’s projections in the haiku manner offer instructive examples of a utopian poetic remaking of the world through cultural mixing—contesting and destabilizing, not just the racialized dichotomy of black and white in the United States, but also the supposed civilizational boundaries between East and West.

Despite literary scholars’ enduring associations of Wright with the rhetoric of violence and indignation, I argue that haiku served the African American poet as a restorative mnemonic device that made it possible for him to revisit the painful past from alternative perspectives of disarmament and reconciliation. These perspectives, I argue, enabled him to write about black people without turning them into flat stereotypes of racial protest, a flaw that James Baldwin criticized as fundamentally marring Wright’s early fiction.³ Furthermore, I claim that Wright’s haiku-inspired poetry performatively supplemented his postcolonial vision of “de-Occidentalization,” a dream of worldwide liberation from both white supremacy and the colonization of the mind.⁴ The classic haiku’s rejection of symbols notwithstanding, I demonstrate that the recurring imagery of frogs in Wright’s projections in the haiku manner enacted and embodied his antiracist decolonization dream, subtly but radically canceling out what he criticized in his political writings as “the frog perspectives” of oppressed peoples.

I. A NEW “NEGRO” LITERATURE AND PEREGRINE POETICS OF INDETERMINACY

Among the existing scholarship on Wright’s haiku-inspired poetry, the most influential has been a Zen-focused approach that typically compares and contrasts Wright’s poetry with the Japanese classics to argue whether or not the former faithfully adheres to the latter’s standards. In numerous articles and books on the subject, Yoshinobu Hakutani has emphasized “selflessness,” “the state of nothingness,” and creative interactions with nature as some of the essential characteristics shared by classic Japanese haiku and the majority of Wright’s haiku-inspired work.⁵ Hakutani thus reads Wright’s late poems as more-or-less direct expressions of Zen, as literary confirmations of a certain level of Buddhist enlightenment that the African American poet may or may not have reached.

Including Michel Fabre’s 1973 pioneering reassessment of Wright’s late poems,⁶ readings by several critics implicitly or explicitly complicate this

Zen-focused interpretation. While recognizing the therapeutic aspects of Wright's engagement with Zen and haiku, these critics have politicized and historicized Wright's projections in the haiku manner as a whole and have shown more interest in *how* and *why* the African American poet adapted the Japanese tradition rather than whether he was faithful to the timeless "truths" of Zen and the standards set by haiku classics.

Such insightful non-Zen readings have shed light on Wright's ambivalence toward nature and have firmly established continuities from his earlier writings. For instance, Sachi Nakachi and Eugene E. Miller have observed the similarity of Wright's attraction to the blues and to haiku. According to these critics, the African American author believed that these cultural forms not only shared folk origins but also were similarly endowed with a unique power of speaking in a "double voice,"⁷ a strategically ambiguous use of words and images that allowed for a "paradoxical linking of disparate elements."⁸ These and other politically informed but nuanced readings have also identified a variety of social themes from poverty, oppression, alienation, objectification of women to the enduring legacies of racism in the United States, even as many of Wright's verbal paintings may seem to represent innocent, dehistoricized, and deterritorialized scenes of nature.⁹

Perceptive readings of Wright's projections in the haiku manner invariably acknowledge irreconcilable tensions or inherent indeterminacy between the racial and the nonracial, the literal and the figurative, the political and the aesthetic, or the social and the natural in Wright's three-line poems. Meta L. Schettler and Richard A. Iadonisi, who have most explicitly discussed this significance of indeterminacy in Wright's haiku-inspired poetry, are correct in observing that Wright was drawn to haiku precisely because of its power to contain a perspective-dependent multiplicity of meanings.¹⁰ In *Haiku*, Wright's sourcebook for the Eastern poetic tradition, R. H. Blyth also insists on the paramount significance of such power:

Japanese readers will all have slightly different translations and meanings to give most of these verses. This is both the power and the weakness of haiku. It is a weakness in that we are not quite sure of the meaning of the writer. It is a power in that haiku demands the *free* poetic life of the reader in parallel with that of the poet.¹¹

To underplay this centrality of indeterminacy in haiku (and Wright's adaptations of it) is to lose sight of his lifelong fascination with shifts in

perspective. From early on in his writing career, Wright was struggling to find an ideal perspective that would allow him to juxtapose or interweave the particular and the universal, to tease out the transracial and transnational significance out of the specific experiences of African Americans, as he memorably articulated in the epigraph of this article.

Dwelling on Blyth's theory of indeterminacy as haiku's enabling weakness, as both its power and limitation, might also help us better understand why Wright himself was unsure about the ultimate value of his own haiku-inspired poems. As he was about to finish editing his manuscript in spring 1960, Wright wrote Margrit de Sablonière, his Dutch translator, an excited letter tinged with anxiety:

These haikus, as you know, were written out of my illness. I was, and am, so damnably sensitive. Never was I so sensitive as when my intestines were raw. So along came that Japanese poetry and harnessed this nervous energy. Maybe I'm all wrong about them. Maybe they have no value, but I will see.¹²

Though Blyth asserted that haiku could not be subjected to "wild," "irresponsible," and "arbitrary" readings despite its indeterminacy of meaning,¹³ I propose that Wright was anxious not just because he was experimenting with a foreign tradition but also because he feared that the readers of his projections in the haiku manner might fail to register the complexity of his new endeavor and receive (or dismiss) them as simple nature poems.

In a re-examination of Wright in terms of postracialism, Sandy Alexandre has emphasized the disjunction between the author's earlier career and his "late style" and characterized his haiku-inspired poetry as "a quixotic [postracial] fantasy of true artistic freedom."¹⁴ Just as Wright feared, Alexandre reads these poems as signaling a depoliticization of the once-militant race man on his deathbed. Such a reading belies, however, Wright's lifelong struggle with racism and, more important, misses the singular achievement of his late poetics of indeterminacy. Despite the poet's own uncertainty about them, I argue that some of these poems that imaginatively play with indeterminacy provide a critical opportunity for interrogating and destabilizing the persistent dichotomies between the racialized subject (as political) and nature poetry (as nonpolitical), between the burden of the African American artist and artistic autonomy—what Langston Hughes famously called the dilemma of "the Negro artist and the racial mountain."¹⁵

II. BEYOND EAST AND WEST: AMBIVALENT IMAGES OF JAPAN AND THE “DE-OCCIDENTALIZATION OF MANKIND”

Far from being a timeless, apolitical expression of Zen, Wright’s haiku-inspired poetics of indeterminacy must be situated in the context of worldwide decolonization and struggle against white supremacy. In particular, the significance of the connection between his decolonizing, antiracist dream of “de-Occidentalization” and his seemingly sudden fascination with non-Western poetics deserves much more scrutiny than it has received before.¹⁶

Wright first used the term “de-Occidentalization” in 1955. Asked by a French newspaper to name “the historical date most charged with significance,” he picked 1905, the year of Japan’s victory over Russia. “That date,” he explained, “marked the beginning of the termination of the Godlike role which the Western white man had been playing to mankind. That date marked the beginning of the de-Occidentalization of the world.”¹⁷ If this answer reflected Wright’s growing consciousness as a global intellectual whose horizons transcended the borders of the United States, his conception of de-Occidentalization also attested to his abiding, yet ambivalent, interest in Japan. As early as in 1940, Wright had Bigger Thomas, the disgruntled black protagonist of *Native Son*, express a similarly broad view of the world, albeit through a lens skewed by *ressentiment*:

Of late he had liked to hear tell of men who could rule others, for in actions such as these he felt that there was a way to escape from this tight morass of fear and shame that sapped at the base of his life. He liked to hear of how Japan was conquering China; of how Hitler was running the Jews to the ground; of how Mussolini was invading Spain. He was not concerned with whether these acts were right or wrong; they simply appealed to him as possible avenues of escape.¹⁸

In “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” an essay published in the same year, Wright expanded on the mental process through which disempowered and thwarted African Americans might identify with imperialist Japan:

I’ve even heard Negroes, in moments of anger and bitterness, praise what Japan is doing in China, not because they believed in oppression (being objects of oppression themselves), but because they would suddenly sense how empty their lives were when looking at the dark

faces of Japanese generals in the rotogravure supplements of the Sunday newspapers. They would dream of what it would be like to live in a country where they could forget their color and play a responsible role in the vital processes of the nation's life.¹⁹

While Wright understood why some African Americans felt this way, he came to have a more sober view of the empire in the East, which had turned out to be no less violent and brutal than its white Western counterparts.

In *The Color Curtain* (1956), a report on the landmark 1955 meeting (in Bandung, Indonesia) of African and Asian leaders in search of an alternative to both communism and Western imperialism, Wright again referred to the “de-Occidentalization of mankind,” this time as the ending of the “supremacy of the Western world” in all dimensions of life.²⁰ He hoped that “in time, the whole world will be de-Occidentalized” and “there will be no East or West!”²¹ He optimistically declared that the realization of this decolonization dream would give birth to a new democratic world without the burdens of tradition, racial discrimination, economic exploitation, or parochial ethnoracial chauvinism.

In this book, Wright also warned that modernization in the non-West could give rise to aggressive cultural and political hybridization at the hands of rabid nationalists and religious fundamentalists, citing Japanese fascism as “the flower of such incongruous grafting of plants of different genres.”²² “It is not difficult to imagine,” Wright further admonished, “Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, and Shintoists launching vast crusades, armed with modern weapons, to make the world safe for their mystical notions.”²³ Typified in this passage, Wright's categorical rejection of organized religion and vernacular spiritual practices worldwide has been widely noted and duly criticized.²⁴ This is not to say, however, that Wright was a neocolonial rationalist in black skin who advocated total westernization of the non-West, as some critics have mischaracterized him.²⁵ As his repeated call for de-Occidentalization makes clear, Wright instead insisted on a dual process of progressive modernization and racial reform in the belief that it would rid both the West and the non-West of pernicious customs and traditions, on the one hand, and Eurocentrism and white supremacy, on the other. As Wright reiterated, his struggle was against what he viewed as “irrationalism” on both sides.²⁶

For this reason, Wright dedicated *White Man, Listen!* (1957) to the leaders of Africa, Asia, and the West Indies. In Wright's mind, these “Westernized non-Westerners” would be his fellow travelers on a long and arduous

journey toward a postcolonial, transcultural, and transracial utopia,²⁷ though he admitted that they were, at that time, little more than “the lonely outsiders who exist precariously / on the clifflike margins of many cultures.”²⁸ In fact, Wright had high hopes for these chosen pioneers “who amidst confusion and stagnation, / seek desperately for a home for their hearts: / a home which, if found, could be a home for the hearts of all men.”²⁹ Echoing what Du Bois had famously theorized as African Americans’ “double consciousness,”³⁰ Wright argued that Western-educated leaders of non-Western nations had a special office to perform, because their liminality between the West and the non-West had given them an alternative vision, “a third but not quite yet clearly defined point of view.”³¹

It is certain that Wright projected his own increasingly globalized consciousness onto this group of elite non-Westerners who had gathered in Bandung. Earlier in *The Color Curtain*, Wright identified himself in such a way as to defy the arbitrary distinction among races while also contesting the persistent dichotomy between the East and the West:

First of all, my position is a split one. I’m black. I’m a man of the West. These hard facts are bound to condition, to some degree, my outlook. I see and understand the West; but I also see and understand the non- or anti-Western point of view. . . . This double vision of mine stems from my being a product of Western civilization and from my racial identity. . . . I’m not non-Western. I’m no enemy of the West. Neither am I an Easterner. . . . I see both worlds from another and third point of view.³²

In this revealing passage, Wright addressed the world beyond the United States, identifying himself as an insider/outsider, a “marginal man” (to borrow the sociologist Robert E. Park’s well-known formulation, with which Wright was familiar)³³ in search of a cosmopolitan home, a utopia beyond race and nationality. As Bill V. Mullen has compellingly shown, however, the trope of “being outside” at times reified and reinforced the binaries of “black” and “white” and “East” and “West.”³⁴ Moreover, it is also true that Wright in the 1950s, having moved away from the structural to the psychological/existential in his critique of racism and colonialism, failed to come up with a feasible and practical political solution to bridge the gap between these binaries. After all, as Wright himself admitted, his “third point of view” was “not quite yet clearly defined.”

III. THE FROG PERSPECTIVES, A THIRD EAR, AND HAUNTING MEMORIES OF THE AMERICAN SOUTH

Traveling to Africa and Asia in the mid-1950s and meditating on his feelings and thoughts in *Black Power* (1954) and *The Color Curtain*, Wright nonetheless sought to transform the peculiar double vision of American "Negroes" into a unique "gift" to address not only the domestic problems of the United States but also larger issues of global modernity.³⁵ However, to claim this "gift," Wright believed that people of African descent in the United States, just like their counterparts who were similarly oppressed elsewhere in the world, would first have to acknowledge the enduring legacies of internalized thinking based on racial hierarchy.

In "The Psychological Reactions of Oppressed People," collected in *White Man, Listen!*, Wright expounded on specific forms of psychological subjugation found among oppressed peoples worldwide. Among others, he referred to "frog perspectives" as constituting a psychologically restricted visual field of the oppressed:

[“Frog perspectives”] is a phrase I’ve borrowed from Nietzsche to describe someone looking from below upward, a sense of someone who feels himself lower than others. The concept of distance involved here is not physical; it is psychological. It involves a situation in which, for moral or social reasons, a person or a group feels that there is another person or group above it. Yet, physically, they all live on the same general material plane. A certain degree of hate combined with love (ambivalence) is always involved in this looking from below upward and the object against which the subject is measuring himself undergoes constant change. He loves the object because he would like to resemble it; he hates the object because his chances of resembling it are remote, slight.³⁶

To illustrate this historically and politically conditioned psychology, Wright cited African Americans’ seemingly innocuous embrace of the ideology of uplifting, encapsulated in the statement “We are rising.”³⁷ He criticized this upward aspiration among blacks for uncritically assuming white values as the norm.³⁸ Although Wright did not mention *Native Son*, the famous scene in his early novel in which Bigger Thomas enviously looks up at an airplane in the sky might also serve as a perfect illustration of this perspective.³⁹

To remedy this constrained vision of the oppressed, Wright advocated the use of “a third ear,”⁴⁰ a trope also appropriated from Nietzsche. While Nietzsche used it to deplore how his fellow citizens had become tone-deaf to literary artistry,⁴¹ Wright encouraged his readers to use this alternative extrasensory perception as a heuristic and therapeutic means of diagnosing and rehabilitating the psychological/perceptual “difficulties and disabilities” of the oppressed.⁴²

As his entire oeuvre confirms, Wright knew well that colonialism and racism had placed an overwhelming symbolic and epistemological weight on visual differences, the most prominent of which was skin color. The third ear was therefore evoked to neutralize such Eurocentric “visualism,”⁴³ the privileged centrality of sight that inscribed and reinforced hierarchically racialized differences based on color. Similar to the decolonizing and de-Occidentalizing “third point of view” discussed earlier, Wright encouraged African Americans and other subjugated peoples of color worldwide to use this auditory intelligence for their epistemological liberation from the visual dominance of whiteness.

From his own experience and extensive reading, Wright came to understand that systematic oppression constrained the perceptions of the oppressed and skewed their perspectives regarding not just their interpersonal relationships but also their interactions with nature. For the enslaved in the American South, nature was indeed a constant source of trouble and dread, as they were forced to toil in the fields while being subjected to a viciously dehumanizing economic, political, and cultural institution that equated them with exploitable objects, such as agricultural products, domesticated animals, or wild beasts.⁴⁴ Growing up in rural Mississippi, Wright knew firsthand the irony of being close to nature but deprived of the freedom to fully experience its beauty:

When an American Negro harbors a yearning for a landscape, it wisely behooves him to choose with care, for, for him, most American landscapes have been robbed of the innocence of their sylvan beauty by the fact that almost every lynching in American history has taken place in such an arcadian setting.⁴⁵

As Fabre has astutely observed, Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices* (1942) nevertheless contains vivid descriptions of nature in the American South, prefiguring the world of his later haiku-inspired poems.⁴⁶ Indeed, in this chronicle of the Great Migration, a historic movement that saw millions of

formerly enslaved people and their descendants flee the Southern plantations during the first half of the twentieth century, apple buds laugh and sunflowers nod, magnolias fill the land with their sweet scent, and birds sing joyously.⁴⁷ Wright also memorably wrote about "the throaty boast of frogs [that] momentarily drowns out the call and counter-call of crickets."⁴⁸

It is crucial to add that Wright painted these moving and lush pastoral pictures of the South, only to divulge the horrors and the toils hidden beneath their surfaces:

But whether in spring or summer or autumn or winter, time slips past us remorselessly, and it is hard to tell of the iron that lies beneath the surface of our quiet, dull days.

To paint the picture of how we live on the tobacco, cane, rice, and cotton plantations is to compete with mighty artists: the movies, the radio, the newspapers, the magazines, and even the Church. They have painted one picture: charming, idyllic, romantic; but we live another: full of the fear of the Lords of the Land, bowing and grinning when we meet white faces, toiling from sun to sun, living in unpainted wooden shacks that sit casually and insecurely upon the red clay.⁴⁹

Not surprisingly, Wright found it difficult—and even irresponsible and immoral—to write lyrically about nature and the Southern landscape without simultaneously adding an explicit social commentary on the widespread and deep-rooted realities of racism.

In *Black Boy* (1945), Wright wrote about his determination to make peace with these memories of the South one day, for he knew that physically leaving the South for the North, or even for Europe, would not automatically lead to psychological liberation:

I was not leaving the South to forget the South, but so that some day I might understand it, might come to know what its rigors had done to me, to its children. I fled so that the numbness of my defensive living might thaw out and let me feel the pain—years later and far away—of what living in the South had meant. . . . I was taking part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns, and, perhaps, to bloom. . . . And if that miracle ever happened, then I would know that there was yet hope in that southern swamp of despair and violence, that light could emerge even

out of the blackest of southern night.⁵⁰

In leaving the American South and then the North for Europe, Wright might have partially cut his roots; instead of becoming a cultural *déraciné*, however, he would eventually succeed in “transplanting” the seeds of his painful memories into “alien soil,” in exposing them to “the warmth of other suns” and finally in letting them sprout and bloom as his haiku-inspired poems.

IV. NEW “NEGRO” WRITING, WORLD LITERATURE, AND POETICS OF COMPLEX SIMPLICITY

Far from being outlandish or “quixotic,” Wright’s haiku-inspired poetry significantly echoed the African American author’s early (if sporadic and little-documented) interest in Japanese literature, which should be carefully juxtaposed with his abiding fascination with Japan’s political and military development. In an unpublished five-page essay entitled “Personalism” (c. 1935–37), Wright expressed his desire to reconceive “Negro” literature from a revolutionary perspective.⁵¹ In the short text, he explored the possibility of sublimating the petit bourgeois “theory of art for the sake of art” to transform literature into a kind of “anti-literature,” an artistically autonomous vehicle of radical individualism that would nevertheless be informed with “the highest intensity of social consciousness possible.”⁵² Of particular relevance to the present discussion is Wright’s emphasis on the image and the transculturally eclectic nature of his projected aesthetic: “Personalism will use all techniques, or part or wholes of techniques, such [as] dadaism, surrealism, imagism, symbolism, realism, etc. as vehicles of expression.”⁵³ Significantly, Wright imagined this new heterogeneously informed “Negro” aesthetic as comprising more than Anglo-European literary traditions:

The basic unit of personalist creation will be the image, that is, an emotional perception of reality. The unity, emotional and philosophic, of these images will constitute the ruling symbol of the work. This symbol, constituted of images born of emotional perception, will carry organically embedded within it the message or judgment of the writer. This image can be as simple as the picture of rain; it can be as complex as a character of Dostoe[v]sky’s. The symbol can be as simple as that used by Japanese writers in their short stories.⁵⁴

Though there is no record of which specific Japanese writers Wright had in mind, suffice it to note here that his conception of personalist new “Negro” literature was explicitly informed by readings of some Japanese texts (or at least by some indirect knowledge of them through white Western writers’ earlier adaptations and appropriations).

In his better-known literary manifesto of the same period, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937), Wright preempted Baldwin’s later critique and called for a transcultural/transracial perspective that would enable him and other African American writers to move beyond the language of protest and mourning. In this article, Wright insisted on African American writers’ need to emulate their vernacular traditions, such as folklore, blues, gospel and work songs. While turning to these African American vernacular cultural expressions as his models and sources of inspiration, Wright also argued that the new “Negro” writing should aspire to constitute an integral part of world literature:

[The new Negro writer’s] vision need not be simple or rendered in primer-like terms; for the life of the Negro people is not simple. The presentation of their lives should be simple, yes; but all the complexity, the strangeness, the magic 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*. Eliot, Stein, Joyce, Proust, Hemingway, and Anderson; Gorky, Barbusse, Nexo, and Jack London no less than the folklore of the Negro himself should form the heritage of the Negro writer.⁵⁵

The transcultural/transracial aesthetic of complex simplicity was given a black-and-white genealogy in this particular instance, but the radical literary transculturalism articulated here clearly anticipated Wright’s willingness to experiment with any foreign and seemingly outlandish form, such as haiku, in the future.

V. FROG PERSPECTIVES VERSUS PROJECTIONS OF FROGS IN THE HAIKU MANNER

Though many critics have examined Wright’s abiding concern with the issue of perspective and haiku’s cathartic effects on him,⁵⁶ little has been said about any meaningful connection between the “frog perspectives” discussed in his anticolonial writings and the recurring figure of frogs in his

haiku-inspired poetry. In this section I elucidate the significance of this figure as Wright reimagined and reconstructed it in his projections in the haiku manner. If he failed to bring about a political and socioeconomic de-Occidentalization, I argue that Wright successfully created what might be described as a de-Occidentalized world literature rooted in his singular experience as an African American.

While underscoring for Wright the importance of indeterminacy in haiku poetics, Blyth's *Haiku* was also responsible for introducing the African American poet to a treasure trove of frog poems. Blyth, a British expat who was interned in Japan during World War II, divided his book into sections that deal with different seasons and themes. The section entitled "Birds and Beasts" devotes eleven pages to frogs.⁵⁷ If the subspecies of frogs are included, a total of thirty-nine poems are cited, ten of which are by Kobayashi Issa (1763–1828). This poet, known for his resilience and tragicomic humor, seems to have influenced Wright as much as the more austere Matsuo Bashō (1644–94) did. According to Blyth, Issa believed too much seriousness was "the cause (and effect) of egotism and self-pity," and therefore the poet subtly mocked it throughout his work.⁵⁸

In the following haiku, for instance, Issa humorously cheers for the weak in the face of the powerful:⁵⁹

Thin frog,
Don't be beat,
Issa is here!⁶⁰

In his interpretation of the poem, Blyth comments, "We have an instinct against the survival of the fittest that Nietzsche could not shout away."⁶¹ With Issa, Blyth sympathetically defends the underdog (underfrog?) against the elitist moral philosophy of Nietzsche, who notoriously rejected compassion for the lowly and the foreign as the morality of the slave.⁶²

The significance of Blyth's reference to Nietzsche becomes more evident if the reader recalls Wright's prior appropriation of "frog perspectives" from the German philosopher. As mentioned, only a few years before Wright read Blyth's account of haiku and produced his own haiku-inspired poems, he was fascinated with Nietzsche, even applying some of his insights to the problems of racism and colonialism. Moreover, in *The Outsider* (1953), Wright conceived of the protagonist, a serial killer named Cross Damon, as a lonely antihero who literally embodied the Nietzschean master's morality: the self-identified outsider believes himself to be liberated not just from a

racialized sense of inferiority and *ressentiment* but also from the social norms of good and evil. In contrast, Issa’s comic sympathy for the thin frog must have suggested to Wright a different way of liberating the oppressed, as Issa built what might be described as a posthuman solidarity with the frog by bringing his perspective to the same level as that of the little creature. In this and other haiku by Issa, frogs time and again challenge Nietzschean frog perspectives.

Finally, let us turn to Wright’s own frog poems. *This Other World* includes six projections of frogs, making them one of the most frequently occurring subjects in this book, along with the moon, the sun, snow, magnolias, scarecrows, and geese. For example, projection 636 uses frogs to highlight the narrator’s sense of isolation:

How lonely it is:
A rattling freight train has left
Fields of croaking frogs.

This scene recalls two frog references in Wright’s earlier writings. In addition to the aforementioned description of the American South in *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright also alluded to frogs in *Black Power* to underscore his sense of insecurity after arriving in Gold Coast: “Night fell and suddenly out of the blue velvet dark came the sound of African crickets that was like an air-raid siren. Frog belches exploded. A soft, feathery thud, like that of a bird, struck the window screen. Reluctantly, I climbed into bed.”⁶³ This reference to frogs (and crickets) in *Black Power* expresses his sense of disorientation and alienation in his ancestral land by analogizing the scene to that of an imminent “air raid.” Though not as sinister, the frog haiku above also expresses the speaker’s isolation, estrangement, and implicit longing for connection with other human beings.⁶⁴

In contrast, 227 offers a radically different image and sound of frogs. As if to contest Nietzsche’s figurative denigration (and Wright’s appropriation of the trope in his antiracist, anticolonial writings), the frogs in this projection live a carefree life, liberated from inferiority complexes or *ressentiment*:

In the damp darkness,
Croaking frogs are belching out
The scent of magnolias.

The first line (“In the damp darkness”) cancels out the whiteness of

magnolias—historically a symbol of the American South—in the third line, foregrounding instead their fragrance. Just as the visual image of magnolias is thus displaced, the frogs’ “croaking” draws the reader’s attention to the pastoral soundscape, presumably an aural memory of the American South from Wright’s childhood. At the same time, as in many of the other projections in the haiku manner, the ultimate geographic indeterminacy of this autobiographical poem also universalizes the particular, for the scene might be set wherever magnolias and frogs can be found together.

Projection 240 also presents a colorfully animated image that defies frog perspectives. This particular frog commands (or claims to command) the moon as the poet’s surrogate:

In a red sunset
A frog commands the night wind
To roll out a moon.

As the frog looks up at the moon in the sky, there is no bitterness, no jealousy!

Another projection, 318, explores the complicated relationship between sight and hearing through a perceptual illusion:

The fog’s density
Deepens the croak of the frogs
On an April dawn.

Depending on the reader’s perspective, vision and hearing can be perceived here as working against each other (in opposition) or together (supplementarily). The poem might be suggesting that *the less one can see, the more one can hear* or that *the more one can see* (the fog), *the more one can hear* (the frogs). Playfully magnifying such a subtle but significant difference (fog/frogs and visibility/invisibility), this projection encourages the reader to explore the fascinating workings of human perception, particularly when they are not constricted by oppression.

Projection 815 stands out as it realizes Blyth’s ideal of haiku by its effective use of indeterminacy:

Glittering with frost,
A dead frog squats livingly
In the garden path.

The frog’s frozen body “squats” on the border between the dead and the living, evoking “some poise of the mind, some balance of conflicting elements from which arises that pleasure whose peculiar quality causes us to give it the name of humor.”⁶⁵ Leaving the reader to determine whether the image is tragic or comic, this subtly humorous poem immortalizes the dead frog’s uncanny liveliness.

The various ways of perceiving—seeing, hearing, and even smelling—frogs in Wright’s haiku-inspired poems demonstrate that this non-Western poetic form served multiple purposes for the African American poet: it enabled him to revivify his formerly “disabled” sensitivity to (or self-censored appreciation of) nature, to use his subtle sense of humor, and to test the power and limitations of condensed lyrical images without framing them with any explicit social commentary.

CONCLUSION: “FOR THE HEARTS OF ALL”

As a beguilingly simple crystallization of Wright’s complex humanity and cosmopolitan aspiration to draw creatively from multiple cultural traditions, his projections in the haiku manner shatter the conventional image of the African American author. Far from being a somber and embittered anti-Western rebel, who used words only as weapons to protest against the dehumanization of the “Negro,” or a culturally insensitive neocolonial rationalist in black skin, Wright was a haiku poet who dreamed of a cosmopolitan utopia and sought to capture “all the complexity, the strangeness, the magic wonder of life that plays like a bright sheen over the most sordid existence.”⁶⁶

By way of conclusion, I turn to yet another projection, 563, a self-reflexive poem in which Wright meditates on the transportability and the translatability of a poetic tradition:

Could this melody
Be sung in other countries
By other birds?

Performatively answering the question he asks in this poem, Wright eloquently affirms his ability to make the peregrine poetics of haiku his own, while inviting other birds/bards to take on a similar challenge of transcultural adaptation. Though a more sinister reading foregrounds anxiety, a nagging sense of the difficulty of intercultural translation, this

poem ultimately suggests that there is no telling how a cultural form might travel from its place of origin to different lands, where it might find unexpected audiences and new sources of energy.

As Blyth emphasized that “haiku is the final flower of all Eastern culture,”⁶⁷ Wright understood that the poetic genre was the product of the cross-pollination of various cultural sources. More important, Wright took Blyth’s lesson in transculturalism and transnationalism one step further. If Blyth never dreamed of the emergence of a haiku community beyond the borders of Japan (though he wrote an entire book on what could be identified as the Zen sensibility in both English and Asian literary classics),⁶⁸ Wright, along with other haiku-inspired poets around the world,⁶⁹ participated in a creative deterritorialization of the tradition and transformed it into a transcivilizational expression that mediated the East and the West, while duly recognizing the genre’s cultural roots.

If his critics accused Richard Wright, in his last years spent outside of the United States, of being culturally deracinated and out of touch with rapidly changing reality at home,⁷⁰ and even if, in moments of self-doubt and desperation, the author sometimes felt like such a rootless outsider, his late transcultural/transracial projections in the haiku manner will remain as a powerful testament of a conflicted and yet hopeful cosmopolitan who lived on “clifflike margins of many cultures,” seeking an alternative home, this other world, not just for himself but “for the hearts of all.”⁷¹

NOTES

¹ Richard Wright, *Haiku: This Other World*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani and Richard L. Tener (New York: Arcade, 1998), Kindle edition. The editors somehow changed the title of Wright’s manuscript. Although Wright himself at times referred to these poems simply as “haiku,” I make a point of highlighting the difference the author implied in his subtitle throughout this article. See Richard Wright, *This Other World: Projections in the Haiku Manner*. Richard Wright Papers, boxes 70–78, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

² W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver (New York: Norton, 1999), 6.

³ James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (1949; repr., New York: Library of America, 1998), 11–18.

⁴ Richard Wright, “Richard Wright: I Curse the Day When for the First Time I Heard the Word ‘Politics,’” in *Conversations with Richard Wright*, ed. Keneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 165.

⁵ See Yoshinobu Hakutani, “Richard Wright’s Haiku, Zen, and the ‘African Primal Outlook upon Life,’” in *The Other World of Richard Wright: Perspectives on His Haiku*, ed. Jianqing Zheng (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 3–24. See also Toru Kiuchi, “Zen Buddhism in Richard Wright’s Haiku,” in Zheng, *Other World*, 25–42, and Zheng’s

introduction, ix–xi.

⁶ Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. Isabel Barzun. 2nd ed. (1973; repr., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

⁷ Sachi Nakachi, “Richard Wright’s Haiku, or the Poetry of Double Voice,” in *African American Haiku: Cultural Visions*, ed. Jianqing Zheng (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 25–34.

⁸ Eugene E. Miller, *Voices of a Native Son: The Poetics of Richard Wright* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 244.

⁹ Richard A. Iadonisi, “‘I Am Nobody’: The Haiku of Richard Wright,” in Zheng, *Other World*, 88–89; Thomas L. Morgan, “Inverting the Haiku Moment: Alienation, Objectification, and Mobility in Richard Wright’s *Haiku: This Other World*,” in Zheng, *Other World*, 92–121; Shawnrecc D. Campbell, “Female Imagery, Exploitation, and Richard Wright’s Journey to his Other World: Haiku,” in Zheng, *Other World*, 57–70; Nakachi, “Richard Wright’s Haiku” and “From Japonisme to Modernism: Richard Wright’s African American Haiku,” in Zheng, *Other World*, 134–47; Meta L. Schettler, “Healing and Loss: Richard Wright’s Haiku and the Southern Landscape,” in Zheng, *Other World*, 43–56.

¹⁰ Schettler, “Healing and Loss,” 48, 50–51; Iadonisi calls this indeterminacy “double consciousness” a la Du Bois (“I Am Nobody,” 86–88).

¹¹ R. H. Blyth, *Haiku*. 4 vols. (Tokyo: Hokuseidō, 1949–52), 1:11–12; emphasis in original. The significance of Blyth’s four-volume *Haiku* is irrefutable. After borrowing these books from the South African beat poet Sinclair Beiles, Wright had his wife purchase copies in London and send them to him in Paris. See Michel Fabre, *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1990), 14.

¹² Qtd. in Fabre, *Unfinished Quest*, 508.

¹³ Blyth, *Haiku*, 1:11–12.

¹⁴ Sandy Alexandre, “Culmination in Miniature: Late Style and the Essence of Richard Wright’s Haiku,” in *Richard Wright in a Post-Racial Imaginary*, ed. William E. Dow, Alice Mikal Craven, and Yoko Nakamura (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 252.

¹⁵ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 55–59.

¹⁶ See the following notes in Nakachi, “From Japonisme to Modernism,” 137; Alexandre, “Culmination in Miniature,” 250; and Brink, “Richard Wright’s Search,” 1081.

¹⁷ Wright, “Richard Wright: I Curse the Day,” 165.

¹⁸ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940; repr., New York: Vintage, 2007), 145. For more information on the widespread and enthusiastic reactions of African American intellectuals, the press, and the general public to the outcome of the Russo-Japanese War, 1904–5, see Reginald Kearney, *African American Views of the Japanese: Solidarity or Sedition?* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

¹⁹ Richard Wright, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” in *Native Son*, 8.

²⁰ Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain*, in *Black Power: Three Books from Exile: Black Power; The Color Curtain; and White Man, Listen!* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 594.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 606.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ For a critique of Wright’s controversial views of Africans, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, “A Long Way from Home: Richard Wright in the Gold Coast,” in *Richard Wright*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 173–90; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “The Third World of Theory: Enlightenment’s Esau,” *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 5 (2008): 191–205.

²⁵ See Gates, “Third World of Theory,” 191–93. For a more sympathetic and nuanced

assessment of Wright's controversial position, see Cornel West, introduction to Wright, *Black Power: Three Books*, vii–xiii; and Haralios Stecopoulos, *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and US Imperialisms, 1898–1976* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 132.

²⁶ Richard Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, in *Black Power: Three Books*, 717.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 633.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 11.

³¹ Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, in *Black Power: Three Books*, 787.

³² Wright, *The Color Curtain*, in *Black Power: Three Books*, 704–6.

³³ For Wright's intimate relationship with the Chicago school of sociology, see James Smethurst, "After Modernism: Richard Wright Interprets the Black Belt," in Dow, Craven, and Nakamura, *Richard Wright in a Post-Racial Imaginary*, 13–26.

³⁴ Bill V. Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2004), 43–71.

³⁵ In Wright's late novel, a hunchbacked white district attorney in New York predicts that African Americans will be "gifted with a double vision" of being both an insider and an outsider of the culture of the United States; see Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (1953; repr., New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 163–64.

³⁶ Wright, *White Man Listen!*, in *Black Power: Three Books*, 656–57. For an informative discussion of this concept in the context of cultural studies and postcolonial criticism, see Paul Gilroy, "Cruciality and Frog's Perspective: An Agenda of Difficulties for the Black Arts Movement in Britain," *Third Text* 5 (Winter 1988–89): 33–44; and Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 160–61.

³⁷ Wright, *White Man Listen!*, in *Black Power: Three Books*, 657.

³⁸ *Ibid.* For an insightful analysis of the problems inherent in the ideology of uplifting, especially its class- and gender-inflected pathologization of the black working class, see Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

³⁹ Wright, *Native Son*, 46–47.

⁴⁰ Wright, *White Man Listen!*, in *Black Power: Three Books*, 657–58.

⁴¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 138.

⁴² Richard Wright, "Why Richard Wright Came Back from France," in Kinnamon and Fabre, *Conversations with Richard Wright*, 123.

⁴³ I have borrowed this term from Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia, 1983).

⁴⁴ For the inextricable link between the two discursive constructs of (nonhuman) nature and race (human nature) in the American culture since the nineteenth century, see Paul Outka, *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave, 2008). Regarding the difficult relationship between nature and African Americans, see also Camille T. Dungy, ed., *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009).

⁴⁵ Richard Wright, "I Choose Exile," c. 1950, Richard Wright Papers, box 6, 110, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

⁴⁶ Michel Fabre, "The Poetry of Richard Wright," in *Critical Essays on Richard Wright*, ed. Yoshinobu Hakutani (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), 252–71.

⁴⁷ Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States of America* (1941; repr., New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1998), 32.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* For an excellent history of the Great Migration, see Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of*

Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration (New York: Random House, 2010). Wilkerson pays homage to Wright in her title, which is taken from a passage in his memoir *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth* (1945; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 34–35.

⁵⁰ Wright, *Black Boy*, 414–15.

⁵¹ Miller, *Voices*, 179.

⁵² Richard Wright, “Personalism,” c. 1935–37, Richard Wright Papers, box 6, folder 13, 1–4, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Richard Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” in Mitchell, *Within the Circle*, 97–106; emphasis added.

⁵⁶ See, among others, Morgan, “Inverting the Haiku Moment,” 95; and Hakutani, “Richard Wright’s Haiku,” 4–5.

⁵⁷ Blyth, *Haiku*, 1:530–40.

⁵⁸ Though Bashō’s “The old pond; / A frog jumps in,— / The sound of the water” has been evoked by most critics in relation to Wright’s haiku-inspired poems, a close examination of Blyth’s *Haiku* suggests Issa might have been a more important influence, at least on the frog motif. In addition to the frog poems quoted in full, Blyth noted that Issa wrote about three hundred more on the subject (1:535). One of the few critics who have pointed out Issa’s specific influence is Lee Gurga. See “Richard Wright’s Place in American Haiku,” in Zheng, *Other World*, 179.

⁵⁹ Blyth, *Haiku*, 1:535.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 155–56.

⁶³ Wright, *Black Power*, in *Black Power: Three Books*, 72.

⁶⁴ Morgan, “Inverting the Haiku Moment,” in Zheng, *Other World*, 117–18; Jianqing Zheng, “Nature, the South, and Spain, in *Other World*, 161–62.

⁶⁵ Blyth, *Haiku*, 1:353.

⁶⁶ Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” in Mitchell, *Within the Circle*, 103.

⁶⁷ Blyth, *Haiku*, 1:iii.

⁶⁸ R. H. Blyth, *Zen in English and Oriental Classics* (Tokyo: Hokuseidō, 1946).

⁶⁹ For a history of haiku’s globalization, see Jeffery Johnson, *Haiku Poetics in the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Poetry* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2011).

⁷⁰ For instance, see J. Saunders Redding, “The Way It Was,” *New York Times Book Review* (October 26, 1958): 4, 38.

⁷¹ Wright, *White Man, Listen!*, in *Black Power: Three Books*, 633.