

Richard Wright Newsletter

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Richard Wright's Place in American Haiku

by

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RICHARD WRIGHT'S HAIKU ARE a subject of perennial interest. Their charm and simplicity have universal appeal. Their contrast, in tone and subject, to his other writings make them stand apart, especially in the context of the poverty, racial hatred, and governmental harassment to which Wright was subjected. Ultimately, however, Richard Wright's haiku must stand or fall on their own merits in this poetic genre. To judge them in any other way would be a disservice both to Wright's achievements and to the unique beauty of haiku.

To evaluate Wright's poems, one must first be able to answer the question, "What is haiku?" In his book *Haiku in English*, Harold Henderson described what he considered the four general rules of Japanese haiku and proposed that writers of English-language haiku would have to explore each of them and adapt them to our language. These rules are form, nature reference, reference to a particular event, and the presentation of this event in the present rather than the past tense. In addition, he discussed the use of the fundamental haiku technique of internal comparison, in which a haiku is made up of two

images that interact imaginatively with each other. I will discuss each of these guidelines briefly in relation to Wright's haiku. I will also discuss the use of literal images and figurative language.

First is form. Taking the understanding that Japanese haiku is composed of seventeen syllables, people somehow got the idea that anything written in seventeen syllables is English constitutes a haiku. What seems difficult for some people to understand is that haiku is a *genre* of poetry, not merely a *form*.

Indeed, the great majority of haiku now published in English do not follow a set syllabic form, but pay greater attention to another aspect of haiku form, its internal structure. Haiku are generally composed of two parts, with a caesura (or pause) between them. When the images comprising the two parts are well chosen, this pause allows for internal comparison between the images. Kôji Kawamoto has named these two parts the "base" and the "superposed part." According to Kawamoto, the base of the poem

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provides interest, while the superposed part provides significance.

Seasonal references were originally included in haiku to evoke the time of year in which the poem was composed. By connecting the experiences of a singly moment to the universal forces of change and renewal, the seasonal reference has developed into haiku's most powerful tool to engage the reader: it enables the poet to invoke the whole of the natural world with a single image, and thus suggest the infinite with the finite.

Haiku tries to record a singular experiences in the present tense, the so-called "haiku moment." James Joyce called moments like these "epiphanies." Poet Czeslaw Milosz remarks of epiphanies, "Epiphany is an unveiling of reality . . . when we intuitively grasp a deeper, more essential reality hidden in things or persons." These are the kinds of moments the best haiku present.

The primary technique for conveying significance in haiku is internal comparison, brought about by carefully juxtaposing two or more images. The interaction between the juxtaposed images creates an imaginative space in which the reader's emotions can grow.

What sets haiku apart from other genres of poetry is its use of literal images that can be interpreted figuratively rather than of overly figurative language. This is perhaps one of the most misunderstood aspects of haiku in the West, and a failure to appreciate this fundamental characteristic has led to much of the tension that has developed between poets in the academic/poetic mainstream and American haiku poets.

While the figurative language of simile and metaphor enhance the expressive range of poetry in general, in the tiny haiku they more often limit the range of the poem than expand it. The role of figurative language in haiku is replaced by the juxtaposition of literal images. For example, consider one of Bashô's most famous haiku:

on a withered bough
a crow is perched-
autumn evening.

Bashô does not tell us that the crow is the grim reaper and that the closing of the day represents the waning of our lives. Instead, the extraordinary combination of an autumn evening, the bare branch, and the crow tells us as much about morality as we need to know without the poet having to spoon-feed us with literary tropes. Certainly we are free to make any of these associations ourselves, and others if we

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The editors welcome all news relevant to the life and work of Richard Wright. The Richard Wright Circle is supported by the departments of English, American, and Africana Studies at The George Washington University.

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A MESSAGE FROM THE
EDITOR

With this issue we welcome two new members to the Advisory Board of the *Richard Wright Newsletter*: Howard Ramsby II and Virginia Whatley Smith, both of whom were appointed at the May 2001 meeting of the Richard Wright Circle at the annual meeting of the American Literature Association in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

We are still running behind in our production schedule, but we are still here - as Langston Hughes used to say.

We are beginning to develop the backlog of essays necessary to sustain the momentum of the *Newsletter*, but we still need your active support. We are particularly interested in hearing from members willing to review books about Richard Wright and his milieu. And, as always, please don't forget to renew your subscription.

The "Little 'Book'" That Time Forgot:
Richard Wright's *Savage Holiday*

by

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"*Savage Holiday* was written for the pulp market and need not detain us here."

-Robert Bone, 1969

WHY HAS *SAVAGE HOLIDAY* RECEIVED such scant attention from literary critics and Wright scholars? Of the critics who have examined the novel, Claudia Tate comes closest to answering this question when she writes, "Wright's critics have maintained that *Savage Holiday*'s marginality is not simply warranted but fortuitous for Wright's reputation because no response is better than negative commentary." She also writes that these critics "also regarded Wright's switch from black to white characters as peculiar if not problematic."

Is Wright's third novel really as bad as critics perceive it to be? Despite the weakness of the novel within Wright's oeuvre, I believe that the erasure of *Savage Holiday* from discussions of Wright's fiction rests primarily on the fact that the (anti-)protagonist of the novel, the forty-three-year-old "retired" insurance salesman Erskine Fowler, is a white character. Wright's strongest writing, usually considered the period including *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938; 1940), *Native Son* (1940), and *Black Boy* (1945), feature what Tate refers to as "the familiar racial plot." In each of these works, an African American protagonist is persecuted by white racism. The economical and ideological overdetermination of this racism limits the mobility of these protagonists to such an extent that the result is more often than not violently fatal. Only "Fire and Cloud" from *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Black Boy* conclude without their protagonists killed (or about to be killed). With *Savage Holiday*, Wright presents us with his only novel composed of a predominantly white cast. For critics who view Wright's portrayal of the plight of African Americans as his strongest asset, this novel would automatically be problematic, as Tate suggests.

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please. We are free to choose them, but they are not forced upon us by the poet. That these interpretations are not forced enables these haiku to be read on two levels, literal and symbolic, creating a richness that is lost with the use of purely figurative language.

Now let us take a look at the poems in *This Other World* in relation to these five elements of haiku. The form that Wright chose to use is a three-line form of five, seven, and five syllables. While the seventeen-syllable form seems for the most part to have worked well for Wright, there are poems, such as numbers 703 and 782, in which he appears to have padded out the poem with unnecessary adjectives, or with extraneous phrases, as in numbers 205 and 209, to achieve this form. In other cases, as in the “pilgrimage geese” of number 622, what seem to be inappropriate verb choices have been made in the interest of achieving this form. While the consistent use of 5-7-5 does give this collection a sort of integrity, it does also pose certain disadvantages, the most striking of which is a loss of immediacy in many of the poems.

Wright appears to have been unaware of the internal structure of haiku. This is evidenced by the large number of poems in *This Other World* that are composed of single images. In spite of this, some of Wright’s poems do have the two-part structure described by Kawamoto and others (for example, see Robert Speiss, “A Certain Open Secret About Haiku”), with the base contributing interest and the superposed part providing significance. An example of this structure is number 198:

The first day of spring:
A servant’s hips shake as she
Wipes a mirror clean.

Here, the second and third lines act as the base, and the first line acts as the superposed section.

In this poem, an intuitive relationship between the seasonal image and the sensual image of the servant create an effect that is both subtle and profound. A large number of the poems in *This Other World*, however, are just single-image poems of the type that are often referred to as “nature sketches,” that is, poems that contain a simple image of nature without any real significance.

While it is true that not every one of Wright’s poems contains a reference to the season, they so all have some reference to non-human nature. In this regard, Wright has more closely followed the Japanese model than haiku attempts by most Western poets.

With few exceptions, most of Wright’s haiku were written in the present tense, so it appears that Wright was at least intuitively aware of this important element of haiku aesthetics. The power of the present, as opposed to the past tense, in haiku can be seen by comparing two of Wright’s haiku, numbers 50 and 39. Here is number 50:

One magnolia
Landed upon another
In the dew-wet grass.

And number 39:

A soft wind at dawn
Lifts one dry leaf and lays it
Upon another.

In the first haiku, the use of the past tense produces a closure that makes it little more than a statement. In the second poem, however, the use of the present tense creates a lightness that lifts us along with the leaf and creates an unresolved tension. Will the leaf lift again? It is exactly the lack of finality that makes this a fine haiku.

Wright’s universal incorporation of nature, if not

the seasons, and his frequent presentation of a single event in the present tense could be seen as the most successful part of Wright's exploration of haiku.

Whether or not Wright understood the use of the caesura to create a cut in haiku, most of Wright's better haiku make use of the technique of internal comparison through the juxtaposition of images. Some of the other poems do contain subtle syntactical cuts, but often these are only slight pauses contained within single-image poems. A consequence is that many of Wright's haiku lack the internal comparison, present in number 39 and 198 quoted above, that is vital to haiku.

It is Wright's repeated use of personification, overt metaphor, and simile - hallmarks of Western poetics - that diminishes so many of these poems as haiku. Take number 236 as an example:

The dusty petals
Of ferocious sunflowers
Hold the rain at bay.

In fact, the sunflowers do no such thing. There are ferocious only in the poet's conceptual mind, so in this case Wright has replaced insight with fancy. The genius of haikus is in finding the seemingly hidden places where the spiritual world seeps through into the material world. In this haiku, and many others like it, the world of the spirit is obscured rather than revealed by the poet's imagined response.

On the contrary, in Wright's strongest haiku, he presents us with vivid literal images. When he trusts to the reader and trusts the haiku to do its work, he is capable of the most delicate effects, as in the startling number 203:

Did somebody call?
Looking over my shoulder:
Massive spring mountains.

Unlike many of the other poems that contain fanciful rhetorical questions, this poem reverberates in the reader's mind with a haunting sense of mystery.

The best haiku deliver what Robert Bly has called "news of the universe." While the best of Wright's poems in *This Other World* do bring this sort of news, most only bring news of the poet's mind and fancy. This brings us to an important question: Are these poems all haiku, or are many of them Western poems written in haiku form? While Wright can certainly be considered an important pioneer of haiku in English, his categorization of the poems in earlier drafts of the manuscript in sections with names like "Projection," "Personification," "Pathos" and the like (see Ogburn) indicates that in many cases he was attempting to explore standard Western poetics within what he understood to me the haiku form, rather than attempting to delve deeply into the poetics of haiku itself. His original subtitle for the collection, "projections in the haiku manner," indicates that even he did not view them completely as haiku, at a time when it was still being debated whether haiku could be written in English. In spite of this, however, a surprising number of his poems do work as haiku. Wright's haiku will always be an important part of the Wright canon. But will they become a part of the canon of American haiku?

Cor van den Heuvel, editor of three editions of *The Haiku Anthology* (most recently from Norton in 1999), is a poet who was himself writing haiku of striking originality in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Van den Heuvel says of Wright's haiku, "I think it highly likely that if Wright had had the benefit of the give and take of advice and criticism with other poets, . . . and more time in his life he would have become a major haiku poet. As it turned out he is only a minor figure in haiku" (personal correspondence, December 12, 2000).

William J. Higginson, author of three books on haiku, *The Haiku Handbook*, *Haiku Seasons*, and *Haiku World* (all from Kodansha International, 1989, 1996, and 1996, respectively), writes, "The bottom line, for me, is that Wright's better haiku, the one to two hundred or so, would have knocked the socks off anyone in our nascent haiku community at that time." However, he goes on to say, "I'm afraid that the poor quality of the majority of the poems in *This Other World* dooms the book to ultimate dustbins, however popular it may be with academics today. If some major entity would put out a slim volume of just the cream of the R[ichard] W[right] crop, his haiku would become well-remembered. But the tome of *This Other World* is daunting, and [a reader] of real poetic sensibility soon tires of searching so hard for the gems among the dross. . . . In retrospect, *This Other World* is only a footnote to the development of haiku in English" (personal correspondence, December 1, 2000). This assessment is consistent with that of publisher William Targ, who wrote to Wright of a manuscript of *This Other World* that "a fine little book could be produced from a careful selection" (see Ogburn). As Higginson's remarks indicate, Wright might have had a major impact on the development of English-language haiku, but the unfortunate delay in their publication has reduced Wright's potential legacy.

To return to the question I posed earlier, are they haiku or are they Western poems in haiku form? I believe the answer is both. Some do work as haiku, but very few of the 817. However, many of the remaining poems work perfectly well as short Western poems. In other words, what have been viewed in the past by haiku critics as failed haiku can now be seen as successful non-haiku poems in haiku form. Whatever they may be called, the poems in *This Other World* show Wright's poetic abilities and are a valuable window into his life. My recommendation to the editors of *This Other World* is that they restore the subtitle, "projections in the haiku manner," to

future editions in order to avoid confusion over this matter.

Let us celebrate Wright's work in haiku for what it is, sometimes seriously flawed, but the best of it among the best haiku that was being written in English at the time. Let us preserve the very best of Richard Wright's haiku and give it its proper place in the English-language haiku canon. As both Higginson and Targ point out, Wright's stature in American haiku could be considerably enhanced by the appearance of a more selective volume of his work in haiku.

While I don't believe that Wright will ever be recognized as the greatest American haiku poet, he will, like other poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, be remembered for his pioneering work in haiku, of not for the quality of the haiku themselves. I do believe that his work will always have a wide audience because in his haiku he faces directly the very human problems of loneliness and exile, and helps give each of us the hope needed to go on in this world for another day.

Because of Wright's simplicity and accessibility and the widespread availability of *This Other World*, he will be the door through which many people will enter American haiku. Haiku has been called "an open door that looks shut." I believe Wright will open that door for many people. That Wright clearly understood that it was not the door to our ordinary world is indicated by the title he chose for his collection, *This Other World*. As this haiku by twentieth-century Japanese haiku master Yatsuka Ishihara shows, this is a magical world recognized by all haiku poets:

pulling light
from the other world. . .

The Milky Way

Wright's "projections in the haiku manner" are a window that gives us a vision of that other world.

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I want to argue, however, that proper historical contextualization within the tradition of African American literature, an examination of satire and critique in the novel, and careful awareness of the ways in which race is constructed and erased in the text will hopefully give *Savage Holiday* a new life within contemporary literary and critical discourse.

Savage Holiday follows three days in the life of Erskine Fowler, a white forty-three year-old "retired" insurance salesman. The retirement party proves to be misleading-for Erskine has been laid off and replaced by a new young Harvard graduate. After he leaves his retirement party, Erskine must confront his own freedom. This is one of the major crises of the novel, because with this freedom, alone in his tenth floor apartment, Erskine "didn't know what to do with himself." His job had placed an "invisible wall" between himself and his "threatening feelings [and] desires." He also does not look forward to a visit from his "colored maid" Minnie, who would "see him at loose ends, pacing to and fro." The other major crisis of the novel is rendered in psychoanalytic terms. Almost from the beginning of the story, Erskine is reaching inside his coat and touching a set of colored pencils that he carries with him. These pencils "seemed to symbolize an inexplicable need to keep contact with some emotional resolution whose meaning and content he did not know."

He then goes to bed - so he can wake up early in the morning to go to Sunday School. He contemplates taking Tony - his five-year-old next door neighbor - with him. Tony's mother, Mabel Blake, a World War II widow and hatcheck girl, proves to be both morally reprehensible and sexually attractive to Erskine. Erskine is strangely attracted to Mabel because her "sensual, impulsive" nature reminds him of his own mother, who died when he was young. His mother had been imprisoned for being a "public nuisance."

As he prepares for his Sunday morning shower, he goes to get his newspaper. Completely nude, he checks to see if anybody is in the hallway. He steps outside his apartment to get his newspaper. Without warning, the draft from the bathroom window inside his apartment blows his front door shut-and locked. This begins one of the most intense sequences in all of Wright's fictional output. Erskine must get back into his apartment before somebody sees him nude. The invisibility of his white upper middle-class self is now uncomfortably visible. Thinking of various ways to get a key without being seen, he tries the elevator so that he can get down to the building superintendent's office on the first floor. After almost being seen, he returns to the tenth floor. He remembers his open bathroom window, accessible from the balcony. When he reaches the balcony, Tony is there, playing on a hobby-horse. Tony, "poised atop the electric hobby-horse, opened his mouth to scream." Tony then falls off the hobbyhorse ten stories to his death.

Although Tony's death is accidental, Erskine is racked with guilt. Subsequently, when asked about the incident, Erskine dreams up various lies (despite his apparent Christian morality) to conceal the fact that he was alone with Tony on the balcony, completely nude. After speaking with the superintendent, Erskine goes to Sunday School. As he ponders Tony's death, he thinks "that the accident was God's own way of bringing a lost woman to her senses" -that woman being Mabel Blake. Erskine then recalls conversations with Tony in which the young boy told him that he often saw his mother "fighting" with various naked men, Tony's unknowing euphemism for sexual intercourse. Erskine then associates his nakedness with what Tony associates as physical fighting. The threat of physical violence posed by Erskine's nude body might have led Tony to his fall, and this adds to Erskine's already accumulated sense of guilt. He then learns that Mabel saw "a naked person on the balcony," but this "vision" is discredited by Mrs.

Westerman (the superintendent's wife) because of Mabel's wild reputation. Mrs. Westerman says, "[Mabel] had a man in her apartment until five this morning, see? That's the kind of woman she is." She also claims that Mabel was "drunk as a coot." Despite Mrs. Westerman's doubts, the possibility of Mabel's witnessing the "crime" is such a powerful possibility to Erskine that he spends most of the next two days trying to marry Mabel in order to keep her silent and conceal his own guilt.

Mabel Blake, who Erskine views as a "good-for-nothing" "little whore" and "a simple slut," is not portrayed in flattering terms. She "could turn her feelings on and off like a water faucet." She claims, "it's not in my nature to be a mother." She invites several men over to her apartment after Tony's death, none of whom knew that she had a son or that he died. This information is interpreted two ways by Erskine: either Mabel is an "innocent" who needs moral guidance, or she is a "hell cat." Because of Erskine's façade of well-groomed teetotaling Christianity, Mabel thinks that he can cure her of her moral impurities, saying, "Erskine, teach me how to live." He proposes to marry her the day after Tony's death. Immediately after Erskine's proposal, she goes out for drinks with friends who also do not know about Tony or his death. Erskine is furious with her. When she returns, they have an argument. Mabel figures out Erskine's apparent intentions for marrying her, and tells him that she saw him on the balcony with Tony before his death. Erskine then blames Tony's death on her insufficiency as a mother. When Mabel threatens to go to the police, Erskine stabs her to death, stabbing her "over and over," not "ceas[ing] until his arm grew so tired that it began to ache." It is the act of murder that recovers the repressed significance of the colored pencils for Erskine. He recalls drawing a picture as a child, with colored pencils, that contained "the image of a dead, broken doll" that was meant to symbolize his mother. His unwanted freedom, coupled with this repression, shatter his own delusional desire to

join “[t]he majority of men, timid and unthinking, [that] obey[ed] the laws and mandates of society because they yearn[ed] to merit the esteem and respect of their law-abiding neighbors.”

Savage Holiday made its first appearance in October 1954, published by Avon, a pulp press known for its “pot boiler” novels. The novel was immediately released in paperback form, and did not receive a single review in the American press, adding to its status as Wright’s most neglected text. This is unfortunate, because as a novel written by an African American and published in 1954, *Savage Holiday* joined at least fifteen novels by African Americans that were published that year. Like *Savage Holiday*, these fictions have received little attention in the academy. And to what extent is having a white protagonist such an “anomaly” in an African American novel? As Gerald Early points out, “The publication of a novel by Wright that featured only white characters was not so unusual; such works by several noted black writers had already appeared” - among them William Attaway’s *Let Me Breathe Thunder* (1939), Ann Petry’s *Country Place* (1947), Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), Chester Himes’s *Cast the First Stone* (1952) and novels by William Gardner Smith, Frank Yerby and Willard Motley. Since African American novels with white protagonists have tended to be marginalized by literary critics, this distinct literary tradition needs further examination.

Wright dedicated the novel to Clinton Brewer, a murderer with a “pathological obsession” (see Fabre), upon whom the novel’s protagonist, Erskine Fowler, was presumably based. In 1923, Brewer had murdered a mother of two who had refused to marry him, and upon his release in 1941 (which was facilitated by letter from Wright to the governor of New Jersey, Thomas A. Edison, Jr.), “he stabbed another young woman in circumstances similar to those of his first crime” (see Fabre). Shortly thereafter, Wright became acquainted with Frederic

Wertham’s *Dark Legend* (1941), which was an “analysis of a real case of matricide” (see Tate). Michel Fabre tells us that after reading the book, “Wright immediately got in touch with [Frederic Wertham], as he wrote on October 24, 1941, in order to determine which factors, motives, or psychological abnormality had made this second murder possible.” Wertham shared Wright’s interest in the case, retaining a lawyer for Brewer while offering to give “expert evidence” which eventually saved Brewer’s life (see Fabre). Although the case of Clinton Brewer was a necessary influence for Wright as he wrote *Savage Holiday*, it has led at least two critics to simply read the novel as a psychoanalytic “case-study,” ignoring the text’s racial satire and/or critique.

In his essay “Richard Wright’s Experiment in Naturalism and Satire: *Lawd Today!*,” Yoshinobu Hakutani reads Wright’s early novel as a successful satire, but as an unsuccessful work of naturalism. Although *Lawd Today!* and *Savage Holiday* are two vastly different novels, both can be read as works of naturalism, but, more fruitfully, they can also be read as works of satire. Hakutani writes, “Jake [Jackson] is aware that he and other blacks in the North are victims of racial strife, but he is not aware that they are victims of capitalism and money worship.” Similarly, Erskine Fowler, if not a victim of capitalism per se, represses certain memories and impulses by immersing himself in the “acquisition of material wealth” (*Conversations*) through work and through worship as “the superintendent of the Mount Ararat Baptist Sunday School.” Even though Erskine is able “solve” his crisis (by killing Mabel and unlocking his repressed memory of symbolic violence toward his mother) and Jake is not, Erskine’s split personality (puritan/murderer) seems to be an obvious target of satire.

Surveying Wright’s major characters for sources of satire, Hakutani writes, “One cannot laugh at a man like Bigger [Thomas] who has so much dignity, nor can one belittle a man like Cross

Damon who has so much intellect.” But one can laugh at Jake Jackson and Erskine Fowler. If Jake is “trying in his own way but always erring,” the same can be said of Erskine Fowler. For a man who “didn’t want to be distracted,” Erskine is represented as the ultimate distracted figure. He engulfs himself with work and church, two major distractions, to keep himself from himself. Erskine also “tries”- he regularly attends church and he wants to give Tony Blake “the proper kind of guidance” that he feels Mabel Blake does not give him. Instead, he gets locked outside of his apartment naked and basically scares Tony to his death with his naked body. After the accident, he determines that it was foreordained and now he has the chance to bring Mrs. Blake “to her senses” by treating her like “his sister in Christ.” This *project* becomes a miserable failure - Erskine’s consciousness becomes “seduced by the persistent image of Mrs. Blake’s nude, voluptuously sinful body which he had glimpsed twice through his open window.” After numerous moral incongruities between Erskine and Mabel are exposed, she suspects that he had something to do with the death of Tony. Erskine then symbolically makes Mabel a sister of Christ in heaven by stabbing her death. Like Jake Jackson, Erskine Fowler is a fool. Both men must be laughed at-their mistakes are foolish indeed-but they must be laughed at cautiously, because their mistakes have tragic consequences. The ridiculous miscalculations made by Erskine have within them the seeds of satire.

The most satirical moments of *Savage Holiday* appear in Part One, entitled “Anxiety.” At Erskine’s “retirement party,” Wright’s description of Erskine’s former co-workers is peppered with caricatures:

Near the center windows in the left wall and at a table decorated with a giant, spraying bouquet of long-stemmed roses sat a quiet, reserved group of men whose fleshy faces, massive bodies, gray and bald heads marked them as wealthy execu-

tives. One of them, a white-haired man whose forceful, ruddy face, China blue eyes, and squared chin gave him the demeanor of a tamed pirate, was speaking.

Erskine himself is one of these types, not quite a “tamed pirate,” but “[a] six-foot, hulking, heavy, muscular man with a Lincoln-like, quiet, stolid face, deep-set brown eyes, a jutting lower lip [and] a shock of jet-black [and] bushy hair.” Wright’s comparison of Erskine to Abraham Lincoln is highly ironic. Lincoln, the president responsible for freeing the slaves, is described as “a man who saved his country and bestowed the blessings of liberty and freedom upon millions of his fellowmen” in the radio broadcast running through *Lawd Today!*. Yet, for Erskine, his eventual “freedom” proves to be anything but a blessing.

Once Erskine reaches his apartment, Wright elaborates upon his seeming sinlessness and sanity: “[Erskine] entered a bedroom that had never been dishonored by the presence of a stray woman of pleasure. Undressing, he assured himself that he’d soon solve the problem of his enforced leisure; that his general state of mind was all right; that he was a good man, honest, kind, clean, straight-the kind of man who loved children.” Now “deprived of the props and supports of a daily task to perform” (*Conversations*), the verisimilitude of Erskine’s puritanical “act” is going to be much more difficult for him to achieve. In another moment of irony, Erskine thinks, “everybody was talking about ‘complexes’ and the ‘unconscious’; and a man called Freud (which always reminded [me] of *fraud!*).” His conscious attempts at the self-assurance of his piety and sanity are, in essence, the real fraud.

The public locus of Erskine’s spirituality, Mount Ararat Baptist Church, is the subject of satire in Part Two (“Ambush”). Because of Tony’s death, Erskine is fifteen minutes late to church-the first time he has been this late in ten years. Wright renders Erskine’s arrival at church in fairly melodramatic prose: “These were his people;

they needed him and he needed them; theirs was a world in which little children did not, for wildly mysterious reasons, tumble from balconies to their deaths; in this world there were no dark, faceless strangers knocking at the doors of one's soul." Wright implies that all the members of this particular white church (and perhaps all people) have within them the capability to murder, as Erskine eventually does. Wright has portrayed the church, not just for Erskine but for all of the churchgoers, as a metaphysical distraction - a distraction that has made partitions out of "reality" - where the "truth" can never be fully achieved because its secrets are unendingly hidden.

Claiming that *Savage Holiday* is a subtle piece of satire is not difficult to do. Why it has not been read as such is puzzling. But what does this claim accomplish? If anything, it should point out that Wright's third novel is more than just a failed attempt at "writing white" or at psychoanalysis. My analysis of *Savage Holiday* as a satire was largely devoid of the topic of race, as has been much of the criticism of the novel. By claiming that the text is a satire, I am doubly claiming that the text is also a critique. Of what? In an interview with Raymond Barthes in 1956, Wright says, "In [*Savage Holiday*], I have attempted to deal with what I consider as the most important problem white people have to face: their moral dilemma" (*Conversations*). The novel, which itself barely draws attention to race or whiteness, provides a critique of the invisibility whiteness has been granted in the United States (and throughout the Western world). Also, in comparison with Wright's major black characters in his other long works of fiction, the "dilemmas" of Erskine Fowler that lead to his act(s) of criminality seem petty and trivial in comparison.

Unlike Jake Jackson (*Lawd Today!*), Bigger Thomas (*Native Son*), and Cross Damon (*The Outsider*), Erskine Fowler's predicament is not financially motivated. Freed of the racist and financial constraints and constructs pushing Jake, Bigger and Cross towards acts of violence-existing in a purely psychological realm of invisible whiteness - Erskine might be Wright's most dangerous protagonist. What is more dangerous than a white man "unable to take advantage of his own freedom" (*Conversations*)?

These are the type of questions that Lále Demirtürk attempts to answer in her essay "Mapping the Terrain of Whiteness: Richard

Wright's *Savage Holiday*." Her main thesis is to show that it was Wright's intention to "write a novel with no explicit 'interracial conflicts,' to demonstrate white people's moral dilemma that causes them to be aggressive to black people." Although there is insufficient historical data available to "prove" Wright's intentions for the novel, this thesis results in a provocative, non-psychoanalytic reading that the text richly deserves.

Demirtürk's essay raises the issue of the invisibility of whiteness. I wish to add to her discussion of the "terrain of whiteness" in *Savage Holiday* by observing in greater detail its invisibility. Because race is antonymous with whiteness, *Savage Holiday* has been called a raceless text, inhabited (predominantly) by white characters. Whiteness itself is barely alluded to in the novel. We learn that Erskine resembles Abraham Lincoln and that his feet are white, but it is only by the inclusion of Erskine's black female maid Minnie into the text that we are made to assume that all the characters in the novel are white. With the exception of Minnie and a "black boy [sitting] on a bench reading a comic magazine" in Central Park, blackness has been whited out of the text. Demirtürk views this as a calculated move by Wright to indict "the master narrative of white American racism, which leaves the 'Negro' out of its boundaries of daily existence, because the concepts of cultural whiteness and humanity are generated as interchangeable terms.

Prior to Erskine's accidental act of helpless nudity and his brutal murder of Mabel Blake, his own invisibility, free from an oppressive external gaze, permits him to exist comfortably in a white world. Wright describes Erskine at his retirement party as:

the kind of man to whom one intuitively and readily rendered a certain degree of instant deference, not because there was anything challenging, threatening, or even strikingly intelligent in those carelessly molded and somewhat blunted features; but because one immediately felt that he was superbly alive, real, just there, with no hint in his attitude of apology for himself or his existence, confident of his inalienable right to confront you and demand his modest due of respect.

By simply being *there*, in his bag of white flesh, he commands a "modest due of respect." It is not

until he is locked naked outside his apartment that he becomes visible. It is then that he becomes "dismayingly conscious of his nudity," shamefully feeling "as though a huge x-ray eye was glaring into his very soul." Demirtürk writes, "In fear of the public gaze, that rigid Puritan as he is, Fowler resists the kind of spectacle he would represent to the people, if they saw the 'naked' aspects of his own self-the uncivilized man." For Wright (as for Demirtürk) then, the viciousness of whiteness is that it is thoroughly invisible. It is granted invisibility through the repression of shame and through the attempted erasure of all that is "uncivilized." This is probably why Wright's novel relies so heavily upon psychoanalysis. There must be a systematic (Western) groundwork that can explain the way whiteness has partitioned off aspects and types of social interaction. In this sense, *Savage Holiday* is a case-study - one example of the moral dilemma of whiteness.

The unspoken whiteness permeating the novel make the few references to African Americans in the text stand out all the more. Each example in the text places a heavy emphasis on them as automatons, unthinking machines. When Mabel Blake tries to account for her lack of maternal instinct (that Erskine will later claim lead to Tony's death-not his naked body), she tells Erskine, "I wanted so much to hire a colored woman to look after Tony, but I'd have to pay fifty dollars a week." Minnie arrives at Erskine's apartment shortly after this conversation. Wright describes Erskine's thoughts:

Erskine was somewhat calmed by Minnie's naturalness. Why worry about some foolish woman's phoning when Minnie accepted Tony's death in so normal a manner? Erskine didn't believe that servants were quite human, but he felt that having them around brought one some standing; one could always depend upon them for simple, human reactions.

His whiteness grants him anonymity throughout the text. It should also be noted that after Erskine turns himself over to the police, they do not believe him to be a murderer. After he confesses, a policeman asks him, "You're not playing a game are you?" When Erskine "readily identifie[s] himself" to the policeman, the cop, in a state of disbelief, gapes in response. He is no longer invisible, no longer capable of being modestly respected. With his whiteness revealed,

he is paradoxically no longer symbolically white, but merely a human, "a guilty creature." If Wright's move here is as calculated as Demirtürk suggests, Erskine's whiteness, and whiteness in general, loses its power when it becomes visible. With this in mind, perhaps it can be claimed that this is one of Wright's central projects as a writer: to expose whiteness. With *Savage Holiday*, Wright exposes a major component of whiteness - its normative, unspoken regulation of racelessness, achieved by a repression of its own guilt.

Even if *Savage Holiday* is Wright's weakest novel, it is an enjoyable read and topically rich enough to be included in larger discussions of his work and the work of other African American novelists from the same time period. Why has the novel been so widely ignored by (Wright's) scholars? Can canonized authors be permitted to write bad fiction? Will ignoring it make it go away? These are serious questions that still hover around Wright's *Savage Holiday*.

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