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"WHITE MAN, LISTEN!"

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MAPPING THE INTERSTITIAL SPACE OF “BLACK”  
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*WHITE MAN, LISTEN!*

BY LÂLE DEMİRTÜRK

In his *White Man, Listen!* (1957), Richard Wright deconstructs the discourse of whiteness in an attempt to dismantle the imperial discourse as he maps the territory of what constitutes a “Western” intellectual. Disrupting the dominant discourse of whiteness by speaking for himself as an African American intellectual, Wright challenges the ways in which blackness informs the white social imaginary. After leaving the United States in 1947, Wright chose to live in France and got seriously involved with the issues of colonialism in the African and Asian countries, developing a critical self-understanding in his travelogues, *Black Power* (1954), *The Color Curtain* (1956), *Pagan Spain* (1957), and *White Man, Listen!* (1957). *Black Power* details Kwame Nkrumah’s anti-colonial strategies in establishing the Gold Coast as an independent Ghana in 1953, as Wright posits himself as “I’m black . . . but I’m Western” (Wright, *Black Power* 322). *The Color Curtain* records the Bandung Conference in Indonesia that unites the leaders of decolonized nations in 1955 with whom Wright asserts: “This meeting of the rejected was in itself a kind of judgment upon that Western world!” (Wright *The Color Curtain* 12). *Pagan Spain*, on the other hand, explains how the fascist leadership of Franco oppressed religious groups (of non-Catholics) and gender-identities (of women). Within the context of these travel narratives, *White Man, Listen!* emerges as a text shaped by Wright’s “political and philosophical commitments to the history of blacks inside the West” (Gilroy 169).

*White Man, Listen!* had a positive reception by the black American press, but “it was ignored or reproached by the white ‘establishment’” (Smith 190-91). One would imagine the white dissatisfaction was strongly related to Wright’s self-definition as an African American intellectual who locates himself in the West. Having stepped outside the United States in refusing to speak from the boundaries of segregation, Wright presents himself as a black intellectual who can speak in Europe from within the “center.” As an African American, he belongs to two worlds—both Western (the traditional site of an intellectual whose power and authority emanate from the West) and non-Western (the site of disempowerment defined by race)—an “interstitial” (Bhabha 148) cultural space that establishes the social site of a Western intellectual linking the black intellectual placed in the margin with the universal. Speaking about the consequences of European colonialism, he introduces Europe, West Africa, and the United States as the three sites of his geospatial imaginary. As Ngwarsungu Chiwengo suggests, Wright “struggles to create a new language of hybridity between the interstitial space[es] of colonialist discourse as ‘an uneasy member’ of the Western world” (Chiwengo 43). He uses his agency to carve out an interstitial space within a predominantly Western social order based on the ideology of whiteness. Unlike “black intellectuals [who] historically have used deracialized discourses as weapons against the status quo of white supremacy” (Posnock 12), Wright uses a racialized discourse that includes mainly the colonized peoples of Africa and Asia, as he deconstructs the imperial configurations of selfhood. Inhabiting the site of black Western intellectual, he troubles the relationship of the Black Subject to Western colonialism, as he speaks for himself to the “white” colonialist.

Wright’s travelogues engage him with anti-colonial struggles that negotiate the essentialist conceptions of blackness. In view of forming an exclusively African

American Western subjectivity, he develops a critical perspective based on the inner ambivalences of his hybrid identity. He celebrates his hybridity in *White Man, Listen!*—a collection of essays based on the speeches that he made in Europe from 1950 to 1956—in which he elucidates his true selfhood: “I’m a rootless man” (Wright, “Why” xxviii). In her introduction to *Richard Wright’s Travel Writings*, Virginia Whatley Smith mentions the Pan-Africanist movement developed by the 1945 Manchester Congress in England to decolonize Africa, and Indonesia’s declaration of its independence from colonial rule immediately following World War II as the two major factors that “accounted for his self-definition in *White Man, Listen!* as a ‘rootless’ man of the world” (Smith “Introduction” xi). While Wright’s lectures are his political statements during his Afro-Asian travels to Ghana and Indonesia, most of his political remarks focus especially on the African experience. The text includes four essays: “The Psychological Reactions of Oppressed People,” “Tradition and Industrialization,” “The Literature of the Negro in the United States,” and “The Miracle of Nationalism in the African Gold Coast.” Although he always celebrates political independence of new nations who have won victory over colonization, Wright’s attitude to the West is ambivalent.

While Wright, the African American intellectual, asks the white colonizers not to be proud of what they did, in “The Psychological Reactions of Oppressed People,” he displays a typically Western attitude towards the colonized African people. Wright’s blame works in both directions: He says that it is not the racial superiority of the white colonizer that ensured his victory over the colonized people, but rather it is “the mental habits of the people” (2). As John M. Reilly asserts, Wright “baldly expressed his disdain for the cultures indigenous to Asia and Africa” (Reilly 234). Yet as Wright records how the white Western civilization conquered the colored people of Asia and Af-

rica, he speaks as an African American intellectual “to . . . white men of the West” (1) about the reactions of partly westernized Asians and Africans, because their “quarrel with the West” means “a fight of the West with *itself*” (3). Building on the “frog perspectives” (6), a term he borrowed from Nietzsche, he describes the colonial subject’s “looking from below upward” (6) to the white colonialist as a determining factor that defines not only the relations of Africa/Asia with the West but also those among Asians/Africans and American Negroes “who live under colonial conditions” (7). However, Wright refuses to assume a “frog perspective” while he looks at the white man, for the “‘whiteness’ of Europe . . . [which is] a psychological reality in the minds of Asians and Africans” (8) does not constitute his experience: after all, he does not look at the white West “from the inside of an American Black Belt” (8). As he as a black intellectual keeps on recording objectively how these colored people (Africans, Asians, and American Negroes) feel about the white people, he is criticized by many Africans on account of his “‘white thinking’” (16). In fact, he also admits that his “Western location” problematizes his relationship to the indigenous people of Asia and Africa. Urging these recently decolonized countries to leave their cultural and religious baggage that hinders them from becoming industrialized, Wright is accused by one young man who was listening to this lecture in Paris as “advocating American intervention in Asia and Africa!” (33).

In “Tradition and Industrialization,” Wright defines himself as “a Western man of color” (46). He delves into the problematics of this definition further: “I’m black. I’m a man of the West” (48). The “interstitial” space that lies between his African Americanness and his Westernness provides him with a unique position with a “double vision” (48) that enables him to perceive Western and non-Western points of view from a perspective “critical of the West” (49). While positing his selfhood on the interstitial

space, he challenges the Eurocentric conception of pride in being Western, for he negotiates his Western conception of self when the West also signifies racism. The interstitial space makes him feel that he can counter the so-called religious factor appropriated by white Western colonialism as an African American intellectual, while also speaking as a Western man urging the indigenous people of color in Africa and Asia to free themselves of "unbridled religion" (53). He feels that the religious beliefs of Asians and Africans "freeze millions in a static degradation" (50). In such moments, Wright almost interiorizes the racial conceptions of the white colonizer. He praises the Western values and the Westernized elite of developing nations with the hope that these countries will not be trapped and hindered by the superstitions and traditions on their way to industrialization. But he also wants them to be politically independent of Western imperialism and fulfill their desire for self-government. He speaks to "the white men of Europe," asking them to allow the westernized African/Asian elite to "have their freedom, or you will lose your own in trying to keep freedom from them" (69).

In "The Literature of the Negro in the United States," he praises the "development of the industrial West" while also noting that it causes "millions of wrecked lives, millions of oppressed" (73). He mentions slavery as forcing the Negro out of his ancestral homeland into an American setting of "rejection and hate" (74). And therefore "the Negro is America's metaphor" (74), because the distance between the tribal African culture of the Negro in the past and the Negro's industrial life in present-day America produces a unique Negro literary expression. He mentions that Alexander Dumas, a Negro writer, had experienced no legal/social prevention from the French society in which he lived, representing himself in his writing as a "Frenchman" (76). Similarly, Alexander Pushkin, a Russian Negro, experienced full freedom in his life and "wrote out of the rich tradition of Russian realism" (77). Both of

these Negro writers implicate themselves within the terrain of Western subjectivity. On the other hand, Phyllis Wheatley is the highly talented black servant, not slave, of the Wheatley family in America, having a Western literary expression in terms similar to those of Dumas and Pushkin.

Wright at this point decodes the term “Negro” as signifying “race hate, rejection, ignorance, segregation, discrimination, slavery, murder, fiery crosses, and fear” (79). George Moses Horton, a slave who finally learned to read and write, produced a literature stemming not from his racial identity but from “a social situation” (81). And his cry for freedom shapes “the tradition of Negro literature in the United States” (81). In citing different Negro writers, Wright also claims that the term Negro is a social construction, but “not racial or biological” (83). Middle-class Negro writers were not well accepted in America, while, curiously enough, they truly represented—like their white counterparts—“valid examples of personality types of Western culture” (87). Wright divides the Negro writing into two groups: (1) those written by the black middle-class writers and (2) those written by the migrant Negro writer, with whom he identifies himself. How the black working-class lived “amidst . . . the most highly industrialized nation on earth” (92) created contradictions out of which “the Negro hurled his hardest words against the white world in which he lived” (93). The bitter tone of the Negro migrant clashed with the black, middle-class literary expression because of the sense of futility in “the heart of the urban Negro” (99). The discrepancy between “the human needs of the Negro and what is demanded of him by white America” (101) directed the American Negro to participate in the working-class movement rather than acting on color consciousness. Wright’s exploration of the strong relationship between Negro expression and the American culture reinforces his statement that “Negroes are Negroes because they are treated as Negroes” (108).

In this case, it is inevitable that the Negro will always "launch criticism upon his native land which made him feel a sense of estrangement that he never wanted" (109).

In "The Miracle of Nationalism in the African Gold Coast," Wright talks about how six black men, "The Secret Circle," the members of the United Gold Coast Convention, a black middle-class organization, hold a secret meeting in an African jungle in 1948 where their exchange of ideas represents the "historical drama of the twentieth century" (112). These ex-tribal men resent the British-oriented strategies for nationhood because they would like to have self-determination in charting their own nation's future. What emerges as tragic out of this Western-educated elite's gathering is that all six of these men "were black and they lived in Africa; but, at heart, they were really more akin to Europe than to Africa" (119). The fact that these people are equally outsiders to the West and to their native land is not the typical position of the western-educated elite of Asia and Africa. But Wright delves into the contradictory presence of the West within the African domain where the African urge for nationalism was a legacy of Christianity. The social inequality between white people and black natives was maintained, and culminated in the goal of British missionaries to educate some Africans in the Gold Coast "to remold their minds into the patterns of white men's minds" (123).

One of these six men who make up "the Secret Circle" was Kwame Nkrumah, who appropriated the tribal loyalties and organized his own people in a forceful boycott against the British and won the elections while in prison, showing to the world that "the African can rule himself." (137). Standing firm against the political upheaval of his people, Nkrumah still led his people to an independent Ghana in 1957. Wright, as an African American intellectual who reported what took place in the Gold Coast that transformed it into Ghana, states that this struggle against white Western colonialism, "cast upon the colored



masses of Asia and Africa" (138), is not enough. Africans should become fully industrialized to cope with the industrial West without losing touch with their "present tribal structure and all" (139), pursuing distinctly African modernity as opposed to imitating "the slow . . . industrial growth of the Western world" (139).

A historically displaced African who challenges the Western narratives on freedom and race, he raises a counter-hegemonic discourse for which the title of the book itself sets the tone even before we enter the text. If a black individual tells the "white man" to "listen," he does not make a mere political statement but indeed speaks from a marginal space assigned to him. He names his location as "black Western intellectual" and politicizes that very space in order to deconstruct the dominant discourse of whiteness. His effort involves not only naming his location and politicizing the space he inhabits but also questioning where his discursive experiences "fit within the articulations and representations that surround" him (Borsa 36). Wright inhabits different sites as a diasporic Subject in the two cultural spaces of the West and Africa. He locates himself within the dominant discourse of whiteness as a Western individual while transgressing the boundaries of a world where the black Subject is "solely configured within the cultural and political terms of the coloniser" (Said 47).

All in all, the text itself serves as a strong statement that embodies the interstitial space of black Western subjectivity. Wright places the non-Western Subject within the domain of social contradiction, where all the black Subjects do not necessarily form a homogeneous identity. The ideology of whiteness, whose terms of value are defined by imperialism, domination, and colonialism, is described from the position of an intellectual who defines the white colonizer as a "brutal idiot" (35) who subverts the values of the Western dominant culture, combining brutality with idiocy as social signifiers of the Other. Here, the

black intellectual who employs "I" in elucidating the interstices of "black" and "Western" is determined by his subject-position as a "Western man of color." In doing that, he juxtaposes an oppositional discourse to the imperial center, which has historically assigned him an inferior subject-position. For instance, he designates the Church—which "had imperialistically condemned all colored mankind" (55)—as an institution built upon basic "Western contradictions" (68): while the West is unable to give up on its irrational prejudices/traditions, it expects non-Westerners to do so to become industrialized. Hence, the consequences of Western colonialism in Africa and Asia are built upon "shattered cultures, disintegrated societies" (5), where Western values are those against which colonized people have always already been measured.

Ironically, he situates Africa as a social Subject within a postcolonial critique while looking at the situation of the Negro in America during colonial times. He defines the black individual's relationship to the industrial West in relation to oppression and racism. He compares the forefathers of the colonizer with those of the American Negro, but the obvious difference between the two groups' *leaving* their homeland is that blacks have been *forced* out of their ancestral homeland. The white-over-black domination bearing the legacy of slavery has produced the cultural space of the Negro, as reflected in Negro literature. He proceeds with a discourse of Africa as a site which harbors a conflict between traditional (African) and modern (Western) values, tragically producing a Western-educated African elite, torn between black nationalism and white imperialism in the Gold Coast (later Ghana). It is at this point that he celebrates Nkrumah's blending of traditional African values with modernity: in re-situating the colonized African Subject within the conceptions of a postcolonial ethos, Nkrumah refuses to stand as the Other, much like the African elite who inhabit the interstitial cultural space.

In *White Man, Listen!*, Wright represents himself as an African American, Western intellectual who speaks from within the interstices of the dominant and subordinate discourses, blurring the ideological boundaries of whiteness (progress and civilization) with brutality, oppression, and exploitation. In his subversive scheme of deconstructing the white Western imperial discourse, he refuses to be relegated to the cultural space constructed for him. As the historical moment—i.e., “I say to you white men of the West” (1)—starts the text, he problematizes the interstitial space that the African American, Western intellectual inhabits. While he, as a historically displaced black Subject, identifies with the white Western construct of Africa as a site of “primitive” people whose traditions hinder them from becoming modern, he also constructs a discourse that celebrates the political independence of the colonized people of Africa. If the definition of modernity is anterior to Africa (and to Asia also, for that matter), then how is Africa going to be “pulled back” to the center? Since African progress in the past had been interrupted by colonialism, then it is that very intervention which inadvertently constructs Africans as Subjects of Western modernity. Wright reinscribes himself as the historically displaced African who has lost touch with his ancestral homeland while he transgresses the racial margin by implicating himself in the center. He decodes the interstices that shape his selfhood in an attempt to dismantle how whiteness informs the black social imaginary. As he writes himself into white colonial Europe’s consciousness, the “white man” no longer signifies a position of dominance and power in his text but is reduced to a monolithic image defined by color(lessness). Hence, what the ideology of whiteness signifies in colonial and postcolonial Africa is now transformed into the interstitial space that harbors the African American, Western intellectual, for it is in this space that blackness informs the white social imaginary while implicating itself within its alterity.

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