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Richard Wright's "Island" of Silence in *The Long Dream*

In the late 1950s, Richard Wright found himself among a community of African American exiles marked by a collective paranoia generated by Cold War witch hunts and the tensions of living the Franco-Algerian war vicariously. Collective paranoia has an allure that has greatly enhanced the personal legacies of authors such as Richard Wright, William Gardner Smith, and Chester Himes. Sadly, it has also often marred critical assessment of their literary output during the time period in question (Maxwell 256; Harrington 3-20; Stovall 189-192). Critics of Wright's *The Long Dream*, his last published novel, broadly asserted that the work was fundamentally weak and flawed as a result of his exiled experience (Hakatuni 276). This particular period in Wright's literary production, however, should be examined in light of the balance he constantly sought between aesthetic and political concerns. Through an analysis of *The Long Dream*, as well as his unpublished manuscript "Island of Hallucination," I will argue that Richard Wright's emergent transnational voice can be found paradoxically in learning to be silent.

In order to develop a literary critique of Wright's decisions to go public with *The Long Dream* and turn from an unfinished "Island of Hallucination" to other projects, Fishbelly's silence, or lack thereof, remains key. While it has been argued that posthumous publication of the manuscript "Island of Hallucination" would be the best way to have full access to Wright's attitudes towards his exile and his political *milieu* at the end of his life, the more pressing revelation for his literary legacy is what I am calling Wright's literature of silence, his presentation of a protagonist in evolving states of a need to *remain silent*. The human need to withdraw into silence or exercise one's right to silence is created with a greater sense of aesthetic balance in *The Long Dream* than it is in "Island of Hallucination," where the ultimate authorial intentions for Fishbelly's characterization are not fully developed. Whereas *The Long Dream* balances Wright's mastery of naturalistic tendencies with a burgeoning modernist perspective, "Island" forays into caricatured depictions of the Negro in Paris.

Fishbelly's daily struggles *in Paris* never did make it to press as a result of a conscious choice by Wright to turn to other projects rather than complete the manuscript. Even so, depicting the life of Fishbelly in Paris was an important thought experiment for Wright with respect to his own future creative directions. *The Long Dream* project, conceived as a trilogy and "considered as a stepping stone into the future and not a retreat into his childhood which is all

the American critics found in it,” encompasses *The Long Dream* as well as Wright’s manuscript, “Island of Hallucination” (Fabre 1973: 527). The third part of the trilogy would have been set in Africa, but was also never completed (Hamalian 120). To allow a reading of the “Island” manuscript to completely overshadow the critical assessment either of *The Long Dream* or Wright’s mindset at the time is to discount the public and controlling place of *The Long Dream* in the trilogy as well as to privilege the allure of the collective paranoia of Wright’s last days when determining the quality of his work.

Wright’s explicit concentration on the literary dimensions of *The Long Dream* was fashioned in tumultuous times, against the backdrop of the 1956 First Congress of Black Writers and Artists, notably, against Fanon’s warning not to place “too much faith in purely literary and artistic endeavors”—in “the culture of culture” (Jules-Rosette 59). “Island of Hallucination” was put aside by Wright in its initial phases as being insufficiently thought through with respect to the proper balance between the “culture of culture” and political positioning. As James Baldwin’s essay “Alas Poor Richard” indicates, debates about the proper balance between aesthetic and political concerns were lively and contentious for the exiled African American community at the time, and especially for Wright (161). Much of the *essay* writing around this debate, reliant as it has always been upon supposed direct quotation by members of the exiled community, mimics the shadow of collective paranoia and perhaps muddies rather than clarifies what the stakes of the game really were. The veracity of the supposed conversations that took place and which are reported in such *essay* writing can never be fully determined. The *essays* only bear witness to the pressing need to be proven right within the terms of the debates. A critical analysis of the crucial literary elements of Richard Wright’s last published novel, *The Long Dream*, can ultimately serve as an alternative mode for discovering Wright’s position in the debates in question.

In a similar vein, the disputes surrounding the potential publication of “Island of Hallucination” as a *roman [à] clef* have ironically made of it a very public document. Even so, although the temptation to look for answers about Richard Wright’s last days in this unpublished work is great, it is also potentially misleading, as are *essays* with arguments that rely on direct quotation of oral statements. These reported statements carry an emotive force of truth without necessarily clarifying Wright’s authorial intentions. In Richard Gibson’s own recently published account of the contexts informing “Island of Hallucination,” he concludes by remarking that “while I do not think that ‘Island of Hallucination’ is a great book, it is a very important document about Richard Wright’s state of mind at the end of his life and reveals as in a cracked mirror the tensions and sad delusions that moved some leading figures in the African American community in Paris in the 1950’s” (917). Gibson’s call for publication of the document is understandable, but it is crucial that the manuscript be regarded as a *document*, not as a finished novel written and acknowledged by Richard Wright. It cannot provide the answers to Wright’s *literary* achievements at the end of his life in the same way that *The Long Dream* does.

Most biographical readings of the political contexts covered in the manuscript grant that Wright’s literary activity was checked by his fear of reprisal from governments, from colleagues, and from friends, and that therefore the paranoiac reactions of Fishbelly throughout “Island” are rooted in factual experiences (Gibson 913). The works of biographers Rowley, Fabre, and Campbell indeed affirm that Wright felt plagued by criticisms from all sides. As Tyler Stovall asserts, “this silence [of Richard Wright on the subject of the French-Algerian conflict]

provoked increasing criticism toward the end of the great writer's life; those who argued that Parisian exile had cut him off, both creatively and politically, from his American roots could now also contend that his new internationalist vision had some serious blind spots" (Stovall 191).

Most notably, Wright's ability to function as a publicly honest writer of protest literature or politically vibrant fiction was stifled by his lack of a suitable public platform from which to comment upon the racial tensions of his adopted home, Paris. In the *Times Literary Supplement* of June 2008, reference to the unpublished "Island" manuscript is used quite perspicaciously by Campbell in his overall assessment of Wright's legacy. Like others, Campbell suggests that Wright's legacy rightly or wrongly suffered from his inability to engage in topical issues at the end of his literary career and thus his particular strengths as a writer were muted (1).

Literary criticism separates political from aesthetic concerns only with great delicacy, but Wright's characterizations of a protagonist who needed to keep silent in *The Long Dream* blends literary technique skillfully with the representation of an individual caught in a state of compromise very similar to Wright's own in those last years. Wright's literature of silence, as structured in *The Long Dream*, shares strong affinities with other prescient black transnational works as well, notably Bernard Dadié's *Un Nègre à Paris* (1959) and William Gardner Smith's *The Stone Face* (1963). The motif of individuals making decisions about what they should or should not say about their situations is crucial to all three novels and comparison of the works indicates that Wright's *aesthetic* development was not as arrested at this point in his career as has been assumed, but was rather part of a generic trend towards constructing a transnational literary voice through deeper explorations and through literary perspectives on immigrant voices and silences—narratives of "cultural displacement and longing" (Jules-Rosette 8).

Fishbelly's Longing and Belonging

Fishbelly's voice evolves in *The Long Dream* into a transnational voice and shifts the focus of Wright's intentions away from the naturalistic tendencies for which his earlier fiction is so appreciated. Even those who championed the "compelling" naturalism of Wright, such as Henry Louis Gates Jr., have remarked upon his contribution to shaping literary modernism. Wright's late experiments in characterization even drift radically towards an absurdist vein in much of "Island" with figures such as Mechanical (a queer black character whose behaviors associate him with both James Baldwin and William Gardner Smith) or in anecdotal episodes such as one in which an old woman refuses to leave a Parisian restaurant for mysterious reasons. To Fishbelly, her stubbornness is initially read as a typically French behavioral pattern until he eventually discovers that she has dropped her false teeth and is ashamed to ask anyone to reach under the table to fetch them for her. This constitutes one of many episodes where Fishbelly bears witness to the Parisian world he confronts.

While reflecting upon certain truths about the Parisian culture he was witnessing, Wright was also shaping a compelling commentary on the absurdity or grotesqueness of the new world confronted by Fishbelly. Tensions between when one can speak or when one must remain silent are already hinted at in the structure of such anecdotal episodes but Wright's control of them is not established. In the second half of the novel, Fishbelly realizes that there are many who would like to "buy his silence" (214). Trotskyist leader Cato even suggests at one point that Fishbelly could help their political cause simply because he was a "silent one" (426).

Had time allowed, the literature of silence which is so deeply structured in *The Long Dream* would no doubt have been continued and perfected in “Island of Hallucination” as these and other instances in the manuscript indicate.

As it stands, Wright’s exploration of an increasingly modernist aesthetic through his motif of the right and need to remain silent, while tenable in *The Long Dream*, remains uncontrolled in the unfinished manuscript. Examination of Wright’s published work, however, leads Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to venture that “Wright may also have been responsible for the shaping of literary modernism” (xiii). Critical examination of *The Long Dream* certainly supports this perspective, and the characterization and events in “Island” suggest that it might have as well. Gates does not choose to expand in this direction, highlighting instead Wright’s legacy as an author of “compelling” protest fiction in the naturalist vein, but one can glean that finding continuity between *The Long Dream* and “Island” requires that one see Wright’s overall creative purpose as a foray into a modernist aesthetic. By contrast, to insist on the manuscript as a semi-autobiographical index of the day-to-day activities of the African American exile community is to dismiss Richard Wright’s own creative purposes for beginning the manuscript—i.e., as a second part of an overall trilogy of novels rooted in an exploration of a literature of silence.

Cynthia Tolentino argues that “even as Wright appropriates sociological modes of analysis to develop his literary technique, he also struggles to distinguish his literary production from communism and sociology” (7). Tolentino’s focus is on the social and political contexts of Wright’s American fiction but her arguments are useful in analyzing the exile fiction as well. Fishbelly’s need to remain silent as a controlling trope of *The Long Dream* appears as part of a shift into an explicit modernist aesthetic in Wright’s literary production. The trope becomes a controlling one at a crucial moment in Wright’s coming to terms with his Parisian setting. For him to be wary of his public image in that domain and to exercise discretion was a constant and pressing need. Ironically, Paris is at once the solution to Fishbelly’s problems in *The Long Dream* and Wright’s urban nightmare at this point in his career.

By the time Wright rejected “Island” as a viable project, Paris had ceased to be a setting where he could successfully continue to create “new ways of understanding the effects of urbanization on the human condition” (Joyce). As a writer, his constant search for ways to translate his own life experience into an aesthetic articulation of an authentic human voice had not yet allowed him to think the “voice” of the Parisian Negro. Wright ultimately withdraws from certain types of characterization or from physical spaces such as the Parisian urban landscape when he ends his work on “Island of Hallucination” and turns back to a treatment of Chicago in the recently published, though also unfinished, *A Father’s Law*.

As a character, Fishbelly remains consistently aware of his longing to belong in his new environment, at the same time that he recognizes the impossibility of ever doing so.

In Paris, he went in and out of bars, offices, cafés, hotels and restaurants free of that dogging racial constraint that had been his all his life. Yet, he was not free [. . .] deep down, he had to admit that he was not truly *in* or *of* France; he knew he could never be French even if he lived in France a million years. He loved France and the French, yet France was always *psychologically distant* in his mind. Had he come too late? (“Island” qtd in Rowley 482-483 emphasis added)