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### “Mankind’s Queerest Laboratory”: Richard Wright and the Speed of Decolonization

*The original task of a genuine revolution ... is never merely to “change the world,” but also—and above all—to “change time.”*

– Giorgio Agamben, “Time and History: Critique of the Instant and the Continuum”

Richard Wright suggests the importance of the art and science of chronometry—of telling time—to diasporic modernity when, speaking at the First Congress of Negro Artists and Writers in Paris in 1956, he interrupts his presentation to pose a question. “Am I ahead of or behind the West?” he asks his audience of fellow artists and intellectuals, querying after the time of the African diaspora vis-à-vis that of the West (*White* 53). He is most immediately concerned with the disorientation of his own situation as the doubly-conscious minority subject living in the West: “My point of view is a Western one,” he continues, “but a Western one that conflicts at several vital points with the present, dominant outlook of the West” (53). Yet his problem simultaneously involves the West’s larger assumptions about itself and its others, schemas where, as Johannes Fabian puts it, “not only past cultures, but all living societies [are] irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time—some upstream, others downstream” (17). This regime of power/knowledge has rendered Western modernity, monolithically understood, the hegemonic time zone according to which the temporalities of all other cultures are to be assessed and judged. The most classic and influential example of its chronometry is Hegel’s delineation of world history, which moves with a dialectical certainty through stages of development until it reaches its pinnacle in the telos of Western civilization. For Hegel, Africa is the one region of the world that does not partake in this dialectical movement of becoming; Africa remains atemporal and static, a region of darkness and nonmovement, “enclosed within itself” (Hegel 173), that has no conceivable relation to time or history.<sup>1</sup>

Such conceptualizations of time have been opposed, challenged, and reconfigured by Wright and other thinkers of diasporic modernity. These practitioners contest the temporal schema of (post)colonial development that decrees that, “[a]s African and African-derived peoples had to sophisticate themselves through their relation to Western ideals and civilizations,

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<sup>1</sup> On Hegel’s influence on diasporic thinking, see Michelle Wright ch. 1.

they had to do so only after the West had. They could either ‘catch up’ with the West by assuming certain practices and behaviors, or forever look across a civilizational chasm, stricken with a constitutional, genetic inability to forge societies that the West would stare upon with awe” (Hanchard 280). In negotiating such hegemonic conceptualizations of time and development, diasporic writers, authors, and intellectuals have experimented with these and other forms of becoming, in the process imagining and bringing about futures that would hopefully diverge from the pasts marked by violence, dislocation, and trauma. In this way, people of the African diaspora have always been philosophers of becoming.<sup>2</sup>

Here, I want to explore Wright’s take on time in his writings on postcoloniality, most notably *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (1954). I suggest that in his travel narrative to the Gold Coast, as well as in his other postcolonial texts, Wright conceptualizes decolonization and modernity in terms of nondialectical temporalities. Delineating what one might call “speeds of postcolonial becoming,” he seeks to think the processes of decolonization in terms of impossible speeds, of trajectories of becoming that have singular velocities. I borrow the term “impossibility” from Gilles Deleuze, who uses it to designate difference that is not a negation or the product of a dialectical comparison but the affirmation of singular forces and becomings. In *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1988), Deleuze writes that “the impossible is an original relation irreducible to any form of contradiction. It is a difference and not a negation” (150n1). With this term, Deleuze continues his elaboration of a theory of becoming that diverges paradigmatically from the influential schemas of Hegelian philosophy.<sup>3</sup> I suggest we understand the movements Wright describes in *Black Power* as moving along impossible trajectories.

Impossibility provides an alternative to the ways in which anthropology has posited human universals through cultural comparisons. As Andrew Sartori notes, in anthropology, the universal standard has been, unsurprisingly, that of the Western—or U.S.—subject. Sartori calls this, apropos Robert Redfield’s work, “[t]he search for knowability.” “The search for comparability was precisely the search for a principle of formal equivalence which would guarantee the knowability of the globe through procedures that were universalistic even as they aimed to conceptualize a cartographically arranged order of difference” (43). Rather than an actualization of a universal model, for Wright African becoming, in its singularity, has a *queer* speed, one whose futurity should unfold along radically different lines than that of Western modernity. While the latter is mired in the bad faith produced by its guilt and fear over the exploitation and genocide that has allowed it to flourish,<sup>4</sup> Africa figures for Wright as “mankind’s queerest laboratory” (*Black Power* 176), a place of experimentation with the speeds of becoming that have been reterritorialized in the West. Queerness here names a force of singularity that may be actualized into an unforeseeable future. In this context, I also suggest that

<sup>2</sup> On temporal politics in diasporic modernity, see Banerjee; Bhabha ch. 12; Chakrabarty; Gilroy; Scott; and Michelle Wright.

<sup>3</sup> In contemporary critical theory, Judith Butler’s work is the best-known articulation of the political utility of Hegelian *Werden*. Abdul JanMohamed’s *The Death-Bound-Subject* (2005) offers an assessment of Wright’s work that is influenced by Butler’s conceptualization of becoming. (For a critique of the unexplored tension between Butler and Lacan in JanMohamed’s reading, see Tuhkanen, “Wager.”) For an elaboration of the Deleuzian theory and politics of becoming, see Grosz, *Nick and Time*.

<sup>4</sup> Wright discusses this in his introduction to Drake and Cayton’s *Black Metropolis* (1945).

the “black power” that his travel narrative seeks to illustrate does not primarily anticipate the formation of U.S. social movements of the 1960s but refers to a theorization of ontological conditions and potentialities of diasporic becoming, an example of which Wright finds in Ghanaian decolonization politics. Black power names an affirmation of what Deleuze, following Nietzschean philosophy, calls forces of becoming (see Deleuze, *Nietzsche*).

I begin tracing Wright’s contribution to postcolonial theory by turning to the influence of African American theories of temporality—the first articulations of which I find in slave narratives—on his early texts, such as *Lawd Today!*, *Native Son*, *12 Million Black Voices*, and *Black Boy*. Elaborating on Frederick Douglass’, Harriet Jacobs’, and William Craft’s work, Wright seeks to demonstrate the persistence of disciplinary models of temporal ordering over the years: he suggests that the practices of Jim Crow are but slight mutations of the time regimens organizing the economies of nineteenth-century slavery. As he focuses more explicitly on the transnational histories of imperialism, migration, and the slave trade—in a word, the constellation of Western modernity—in his later work, Wright imports the concepts that he had developed in his work on the African American experience to his analysis of and speculations about the futures of decolonization. With the thematic consistency of his early and later work, Wright simultaneously suggests the transnational, diasporic character of the black experience in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

By situating Wright’s understanding of decolonization’s speed in the context of African American history and culture, as well as Western theories of development and progress, I want to attune the reader to the ambivalence in his evocative and problematic representation of non-Western cultures. I read the largely negative commentary that his travel narrative has elicited as a symptom of Wright’s ambivalence.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, texts such as *Black Power* may stand as examples of ethnological and anthropological works that, in Fabian’s terms, deny “[t]he radical contemporaneity of mankind” (xli) by deploying time “for the purpose of distancing those who are observed from the Time of the observer” (25). As many critics have noted, *Black Power* represents Africans as stuck in the past and unable to pick up the speed of modernity: they are enthralled by what Wright calls “tribal dreams,” asleep in a world fast moving forward around them. Reasonably, this has been cited as an example of anthropology’s “denial of the co-evalness” of the West and its others. On the other hand, describing frequent moments of the narrator’s amazement, even horror, at the unexpected velocities that he finds in Africa and Africans, Wright appears to be working toward a radical theory of diasporic time and becoming. Here, the lack of synchronicity between the narrator and the Africans also suggests that there are speeds at work in Africa other than that of Western modernity, speeds that might force becoming onto new, unexpected tracks.

One way to appreciate the productive ambivalence of *Black Power* is to insist on the distinction between the travel narrative’s author and narrator—a basic defamiliarizing tactic in literary scholarship, which many of Wright’s readers have nevertheless failed to execute. While the travel narrative ostensibly comprises a straightforward record of the author’s visit to the Gold

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<sup>5</sup> Amid Wright’s early work, *12 Million Black Voices* situates African American history in the context of diasporic modernity.

<sup>6</sup> See Appiah; Chiwengo; Felgar 138-42; Henninger; Johnson; Julien; Meriwether 155-56; Moore; Nwankwo; Rowley; Shankar; and Thomas. For more sympathetic readings of *Black Power*, see Diawara, *In Search* 65-76; Gaines, *American* ch. 2; Hanchard; and JanMohamed, “Richard.”

Coast, I would argue that the frequent descriptions of his bewilderment and confusion when faced with African life clearly exhibit Wright's literary craft. Readings content at lamenting the author's flamboyant failure to relate more productively to African traditions, in other words, obfuscate the persistent *literariness* of Wright's work. Distinguishing between the author and the narrator of a nonfiction text—a by-now customary move in autobiography studies—allows us to pay attention to the literary strategies that inform all Wright's texts.<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to many of his other critics, I thus argue for a reading of Wright as a postcolonial theorist who critiques Western calls for developmental models that seek to control the processes of decolonization for the benefit of the former colonizing powers. Throughout his work, Wright theorizes becoming; I want to make the case for his work as a little-utilized resource for postcolonial theory. Of previous commentators, Michael Hanchard approximates my approach most closely. According to his perceptive argument, British colonization proceeded through the harnessing of temporal models: "Time was the process through which British racism and imperialism moved in Ghana" (293). He suggests that the work of decolonization demanded the invention of, or experimentation with, different times: "What was required was an altering of the extant historical path toward a new time" (292). The speeds that were articulated in the politics of the newly-independent nation constituted experimentations with becoming such that the future would not be a mere repetition of the supposedly universal movement of history as it had unfolded in the modernized West.

## Races With Time

Wright's concern with the speed of decolonization partially emerges from the context of African American literature, culture, and politics, which have always been concerned with the velocities available or denied to the slaves and their descendants.<sup>8</sup> As the earliest voices in African American writing attest, slavery, African diasporic peoples' most common introduction to modernity, invariably imposed temporizing demands on the enslaved. On the one hand, slavery's time discipline and time obedience<sup>9</sup> stipulated prompt responses and rapid movements from those in bondage. This is exemplified in a scene in William Craft's slave narrative *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), where a proud master describes his servant: "When I speak to my Ned," the slaveholder boasts, "he darts like lightning" (506). The disciplined slave body is required to pay ritualistic obeisance to the master's word; here its ostentation consists of the speed that reduces the gap between stimulus and action—the gap where defiance may reside—to an absolute minimum. On the other hand, slavery is characterized by Frederick Douglass' description, in the opening paragraph of his 1845 *Narrative*, by the repetitive, cyclical time of labor in which the enslaved subject is imprisoned. The slave's inability to access times beyond the cycle of indefinite, identical repetitions—of "planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, [and] fall-time" (15)—constitutes the temporality of "social death," as

<sup>7</sup> For an analogous argument on Wright's autobiography, see Adams ch. 4.

<sup>8</sup> On African American scholarship and time, see Reichardt.

<sup>9</sup> I take these terms from Mark Smith: time obedience "refers to a respect for mechanical time among workers that, unlike time discipline, is not internalized but rather enforced or imposed by time-conscious planter-managers through the threat or use of violence or through the constant repetition of mechanically defined time through sound as with the chiming of clock-regulated bells" (16).