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Race, Displacement, and Richard Wright's Transatlantic Real Estate

I sensed, too, that the Southern scheme of oppression was but an appendage of a far vaster and in many respects more ruthless and impersonal commodity-profit machine.

Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born"

"I wanted to be happy in this world, not out of it. I didn't want that [Black Church] kind of happiness. The white folks like us to be religious, then they can do what they want to with us."

Bigger Thomas in response to Boris Max's "Couldn't you feel at home there?" *Native Son*

African existence is neither a linear time nor a simple sequence in which each moment effaces, annuls, and replaces those that preceded it, to the point where a single age exists within society. This time is not a series but an interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures.

Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*

The interlocutor in Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage" declares: "*Deep in the festering hold thy father lies, / of his bones New England pews are made, / those are altar lights that were his eyes.*"¹ Hayden's quatrain represents what Caribbean writer Edouard Glissant calls the "point of entanglement."² For Glissant the point of entanglement is a multilayered space of conjuncture, a collective unconscious where structures of memory and feeling collage. In "Middle Passage," discourses and temporalities are polyvalent. Ocean depths, like the unconscious they haunt, are plumbed. Expressive cultures cross. The quatrain echoes, yet revises, *The Tempest's* "Full fathom five thy father lies." We are, thus, confronted by the phantasmagoria, the memory and desire, of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Hayden's poem carries us not only to the "festering hold" of the trade, but also to its fountainhead: "New

¹ Gates and McKay, eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997, p. 1501. All citations refer to this rendering of Hayden's classic poem.

² *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1999), p. 15. All citations refer to this edition translated and edited by Professor J. Michael Dash.

England pews.” The pews are synecdoche for *Christian Capitalism*, an oxymoronic capitalism, a “holy avariciousness” that was a prime mover and sanction for political, mercantile, manufacturing, and exchange relationships that devastated Africa and compromised, beyond apology or revision, the ethics of Enlightenment. The Transatlantic Trade violently displaced millions of Africans from complex, stable societies and transported them into New World plantation slavery. In its barbarous operations, the trade gave birth to race. In *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, scholar Marcus Rediker writes as follows:

Sailors . . . “produced” slaves within the ship as factory, doubling their economic value as they moved them from a market on the eastern Atlantic to one on the West and helping to create the labor power that animated a growing world economy . . . In producing workers for the plantation the ship-factory also produced “race.” At the beginning of the Middle Passage, captains hired a motley crew of sailors, who would, on the coast of Africa, become “white men.” At the beginning of the Middle Passage, captains loaded on board the vessel a multiethnic collection of Africans who would, in the American port, become “black people” or a “negro race.”³

Fictions of *race* were, and remain, byproducts of greed disguised as Christian mission.

Novelist Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* narrates the process perfectly. First come the missionaries. They anoint the path. There follow magistrates, merchants, and marauders of enslavement and colonization. A venerable adage reads: “When the missionaries came, we had the land; they had the Bible. When they departed, we had the Bible; they had the land.” In “The Psychological Reactions of Oppressed People” found in *White Man, Listen!* Richard Wright captures this Christian Capitalist displacement in epic terms.

Buttressed by their belief that their God had entrusted the earth into their keeping, drunk with power and possibility, waxing rich through trade in commodities, human and non-human, with awesome naval and merchant marines at their disposal, their countries filled with human debris anxious for any adventures, psychologically armed with new facts, white Western Christian civilization during the fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, with a long, slow, and bloody explosion, hurled itself upon the sprawling masses of colored humanity in Asia and Africa.⁴

Wright’s address to the global drama of race and displacement, capitalism and slavery, led to his alliance with revolutionary thinkers such as George Padmore and Franz Fanon. It also yielded a critique of the *real estate* of the Transatlantic Trade.

Let it be clear from the outset that the present reflection is not of epic proportions. It confines scholarly inquiry to a certain set of race and displacement concerns that flow out of the slave trade. It considers the geo-affective consequences in the United States of what Wright terms “the psychology of oppressed people.” Wright makes clear throughout his brilliant career that the dynamics of Enlightenment—its divesting of what he calls

³ Rediker (New York: Penguin, 2007), p. 10, p.40. All citations refer to this edition.

⁴ *White Man, Listen!* (New York: Anchor, 1964), P. 1.

“dependence systems of family life . . . anchored in ancestor-worshipping religion”—produced a new, nonreligious, independent, power hungry, and endlessly inventive order of humanity that was, and remains, a danger to itself and others (the emergent order was comprised of those Enlightenment-empowered buccaneers who “hurled” themselves upon the masses).⁵ Wright was appalled by the carnage and loss wrought by this new order of humanity. Yet he gazed with unabated and admiring awe on the accomplishments of the “enlightened” personality and its bold instantiation of *modernity*. George Kent calls Wright’s bifurcated perspective a fascination with “blackness and the adventure of western culture.”⁶

Perhaps nowhere in his oeuvre is Wright more intellectually embroiled with the entangling alliance of blackness and Enlightenment than in *Black Power*. Kevin Gaines’ “Revisiting Richard Wright in Ghana: Black Radicalism and the Dialectics of Diaspora” offers a revisionary distillate of Wright’s engagement with what might be called the prisoner’s dilemma of enthrallment by the “good of the evil” of the Enlightenment’s “raced displacement.”⁷ That is to say, while, for Wright, the West was responsible for brutal and barbaric real-estate grabs, it also provided a close encounter of the first kind with western *modernity*. Reclamation of stolen black lands and lives for Wright, as Gaines makes astutely clear, demanded a radical, transnational community politics of *Diaspora*. Wright’s vision of this liberating *communitas* became, through his intellectual affiliations, ever more global. His politics followed suit. But always, Wright’s focus was the co-extensiveness of real estate and the psychology of oppressed people. Who owns what or whom? And to what ends should a liberating art, psychology, politics, and economics of Diaspora “blackness” and “power” be dedicated? In his autobiographical *Black Boy* as well as his folk history *12 Million Black Voices*, Wright captivantly backlights the displacement and “push factors” that drove southern blacks from rack-rent plantation abjection to claustrophobic, northern urban systems of white ownership and control. He brilliantly illuminates the nervous circuitry of Enlightenment modernity and black subjugation.

Born on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi, in 1908, Wright’s childhood was a series of interruptions. Abject poverty of southern life made sharecropping exploitation and white violence an enforceable “ethics of living Jim Crow.” Driven by poverty to seek a better life for his family, Richard’s father Nathan insisted on migrating from plantation economies owned and ruled by “The Lords of the Land” to southern urban existence in Memphis, Tennessee. The lures of Memphis captivated Nathan, and the result was family dissolution. An orphaned existence followed for Richard and his younger brother when their mother Ella could no longer support the household.

Eventually fleeing the South altogether, Wright dreamed of breathing space and clarity of black settlement in the North. His expectations were pure *desire* born of dread and stolen literacy. His reading and habits of mind produced an outlaw ache and rebellious determination. He would, by any means necessary, *displace himself* from the ethics of Jim Crow and seek a liberating human community elsewhere, a fellowship bonded by intellectual purpose and common cause. He dreamed that such a space might be a northern *black community*. He writes in *Black Boy* as follows:

⁵ Ibid., p. 4

⁶ *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1992).

⁷ *Social Text*, 67 (2001): 75-102.

I dreamed of going north and writing books, novels. The North symbolized to me all that I had not felt and seen; it had no relation whatever to what actually existed. Yet, by imagining a place where everything was possible, I kept hope alive in me . . . In me was shaping a yearning for a kind of consciousness, a mode of being that the way of life about me had said could not be, must not be, and upon which the penalty of death had been placed.⁸

The longed-for “consciousness” and “mode of being” enunciated signified—even in Wright’s bourgeoning days as a black Communist writer—what Gaines delineates as a transnational, black communal politics of liberation and empowerment. Community is, thus, the enduring essence of Wright’s desire. It is also the focus of Bigger Thomas’ reverie in *Native Son*:

Slowly he lifted his hands in the darkness and held them in mid-air, the fingers spread weakly open. If he reached out with his hands, and if his hands were electric wires, and if his heart were a battery giving life and fire to those hands, and if he reached out with his hands and touched other people, reached out through these stone walls and felt other hands connected with other hearts—if he did that, would there be a reply, a shock? . . . in that touch, response of recognition, there would be union, identity; there would be a supporting oneness, a wholeness which had been denied him all his life.⁹

What Wright discovered on arrival in Chicago, however, was the urban equivalent of the slave ship’s “festering hold” and the “lockdown” of southern black masses by the Lords of the Land. Blacks lived badly in the windy city; the black majority was housed in that “zone” the urban sociologist Robert Park describes as a site of smokestacks, ashes, deteriorating housing, dehumanizing population density, crime, vermin, violence, and disease.¹⁰ Psychologically, there was no black or human clarity or community to tap into.

From Wright’s stunned, displaced, racial, and radical perspective, Chicago’s northern urban black populace seemed financially blasted, and psychologically bereft of any sense of common purpose. Black intellectual and resistive impulses of racial advancement

⁸ (New York: HarperCollins, 1945) 186-187.

⁹ *Native Son*, (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005) p. 362.

¹⁰ Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie, *The City: Suggestions for Investigation of Human Nature in the Urban Environment*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926). Park and his co-authors elaborated an account of the “human ecology” of the city, suggesting that “zones” of the urban evolve differentially through “evolution.” The quality of resources, occupations, and character of a zone’s inhabitants determined the zone’s evolution. Implicit in Park’s account is an aura of Darwinian “survival of the fittest.” The Darwinian echoes have drawn fire for their “anthropocentricism” and too deterministic transfer from “the human” to “the urban.” Of interest to my present reflections is *The City*’s observation that: “*The city cannot fix land values, and we leave to private enterprise, for the most part, the task of determining the city’s limits and the location of its residential and industrial districts.*” (My emphasis) Richard Wright was an informal student and partisan of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology led by Park. In Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices*, the narrator depicts Park’s industrial “zone” in terms of smokestacks, ashes, and black overcrowding.