

2021-09-01

"Projections in the Haiku Manner': Richard Wright, T. S. Eliot, and Transpacific Modernism"

A. Patterson. 2021. "'Projections in the Haiku Manner': Richard Wright, T. S. Eliot, and Transpacific Modernism." T. S. Eliot Studies Annual, Volume 3, pp. 11 - 21 (11).

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/44241>

Downloaded from DSpace Repository, DSpace Institution's institutional repository

“T. S. Eliot, Richard Wright, and Transpacific Modernism”
Anita Patterson, Boston University

In August 1959, shortly after being hospitalized for a serious illness in Paris, Richard Wright met a young South African by the name of Sinclair Beiles, who happened to mention that he was interested in Japanese haiku. It is likely that the two men were introduced by their mutual friend, Jean-Paul Sartre, at the Beat Hotel in Paris, which was close to the rue Monsieur le Prince, where Wright was living at the time. Inspired by this conversation, Wright asked Beiles to lend him the four volumes of *Haiku*, an influential work of scholarship by R. H. Blyth. During the summer, fall, and winter that year, Wright studied Blyth’s discussion of haiku and Buddhism, along with the *Complete Works of D. T. Suzuki*, Suzuki’s second series of *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, and Christmas Humphrey’s *Zen Buddhism*, while composing poems for a manuscript he would eventually call “This Other World: Projections in the Haiku Manner.”¹ By June, 1960, Wright had selected 817 out of the 4,000 poems for this manuscript, and submitted it to William Targ of World Publishing. Targ discouraged publication, and Wright’s *Haiku: This Other World* remained in the Rare Book Collection of Yale’s Beinecke Library until its publication in 1998, thirty-eight years after Wright’s death.²

Wright composed *Haiku: This Other World* in dark times. In addition to his debilitating illness, Wright wanted to leave Paris because of what he felt to be the increasingly autocratic political atmosphere there, but he was also painfully aware of the slow progress of desegregation and the bleak situation of black artists and intellectuals in the U.S., and would not have been able to return there even if he had wanted to. He was being monitored by American intelligence agencies; his favorite editor and friend at Doubleday, Edward Aswell, died in December 1958; his close friend, George Padmore,

died in September 1959; and in January 1959, Wright learned that his mother, Ella, whom he had not seen for some 15 years, died in the Chicago home of his brother, Leon.³ As Julia Wright, his daughter, has remarked, “Today I also wonder whether these little poetic gems did not serve another deeper purpose as my father attempted to bring closure to the numerous mournings he experienced during the same period.... [My] father’s own response to this onslaught against the deepest springs of his genius was to continue to spin these poems of light out of the gathering darkness.”⁴ In what follows, I hope to lay a foundation for understanding how Wright’s intercultural experiments with haiku, which mark a significant advance in a tradition of East-West exchange in American literature, were significantly influenced by T. S. Eliot. I will present contexts and a framework for understanding Wright’s constant revisiting of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, to show how Eliot’s work fundamentally shaped Wright’s style and perspective. My analysis will culminate in a reading of just two haiku-inspired poems by Wright, although there is much more to be said about the importance of Eliot’s modernism for Wright’s late development as a poet.

Margaret Walker recalls that Wright “worshipped the art of poetry,” and “felt a close affinity” to Eliot and Pound, reading their poetry “with a passion.”⁵ Although the Wright scholar Yoshinobu Hakutani has extensively studied the connection between Pound’s imagist poetics and Wright’s *Haiku: This Other World*, next to nothing has been said about how Eliot’s *The Waste Land* may have influenced Wright.⁶ This omission is surprising, given Wright’s early, formative encounter with *The Waste Land*, which he first read in the early 1930s, when he was working in the Chicago Post Office and attended meetings at the John Reed Club of Chicago, where Eliot’s work was often

discussed. Part three of *Lawd Today!*, Wright's first novel, was begun in 1935, while Wright was still reading Eliot with a passion, and carried this memorable, haunting epigraph from *The Waste Land*:

But at my back in a cold blast I hear
The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.⁷

Wright's epigraph explicitly alludes to one of the most enigmatic, studied passages in all of Eliot's poetry, part three of *The Waste Land*, called "The Fire Sermon," which culminates in a juxtaposition of fragments from Augustine's *Confessions* and a Buddhist scripture that Eliot identifies to in a footnote and had studied in the original Pali for Charles Lanman's course as a graduate student at Harvard.⁸ Indeed, Wright even went so far as to title the third part of his novel "Rat's Alley," an allusion to the second part of *The Waste Land*. Frances Dickey has recently shown that in segregated cities like Eliot's St. Louis, African Americans lived in industrialized areas in tenements facing alleyways, and thus, for Eliot, the alley was a liminal space marking the color-line, both literally and symbolically.⁹ In Wright's novel, the phrase refers to a back alley on the South Side of Chicago during the Depression, underscoring the fertile ambiguity of *The Waste Land*'s setting, which could be a World War I trench in the Somme sector, a British Army area on the Western Front, or major metropolitan area in London, Paris, Boston, or St. Louis:

I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.¹⁰

Tatsuo Murata has observed that the "waste land" setting of Eliot's poem can be interpreted from the perspective of Mahayana Buddhism as a "world of suffering" that is the "antithesis" of a "Pure Land" that offers respite from karmic transmigration.¹¹ For Wright, and very likely for Eliot, the desolate setting of an urban waste land wrought by

war would have added significance, because the scenes of death in the trenches would also summon up memories of racial strife in the United States, including the horrific 1917 riot in East St. Louis, Eliot's hometown. In a September 1917 issue of *The Crisis*, a magazine he edited for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, W.E.B. Du Bois and the activist Martha Gruening reported on this rampage, when a white mob destroyed at least \$400,000 worth of property and lynched between one and two hundred African Americans, who had migrated to St. Louis from the South, drawn by the lure of jobs in the wartime economy. The white rioters of East St. Louis, Du Bois explained, felt threatened by the "outsiders" holding jobs that were rightfully their own, and this fostered race hatred against African Americans. "When genuine mob law did finally reign on July 2, the scenes were indescribable," Du Bois concludes. "Germany has nothing on East St. Louis when it comes to 'frightfulness.' ... Where was the militia? At best they stood idly about in tacit sympathy with the rioters."¹² Viewed in light of this conflict, Eliot's transnational topography in *The Waste Land* can be regarded as implicitly comparing the rise of racial nationalisms in Europe and violence on the WWI battlefields to the racial divide and violence of the East St. Louis massacre, situating what Du Bois calls "the problem of the color line" in the global context of industrial capitalism and empire-building.

In *Black Power*, published in 1954, Wright drew close connections between racism in the U.S. and the larger international dynamics of empire. But the unforgettable importance of Eliot's rendering of the industrial city as a battlefield in *The Waste Land* would have been catalyzed for Wright years earlier by Du Bois's vivid contextualization of the race riots in East St. Louis as a crossroads of the far-reaching imperial routes of

global economic exchange.¹³ For Wright, as for Du Bois, the “scramble” for empire was as much a cause for the racial nationalist violence in the First World War as it was in East St. Louis or, for that matter, in lynchings down South. Thus it should come as no surprise that, in the “Rats’ Alley” section of Wright’s *Lawd Today!*, there is a scene where lynchings in the South are explicitly compared to racial nationalist violence in the years leading up to and during the Second World War, including the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and the Holocaust in Nazi Germany.¹⁴

Wright’s abiding memory of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* resurfaces in surprising ways throughout his works. To give just one example, in his portrayal of the Chicago cityscape in “The Horror and the Glory,” Part II of *Black Boy*, which was completed in 1944, almost a decade after he wrote *Lawd Today!*, a recollection of Eliot occurs when Wright describes his arrival as a migrant fleeing the racial violence in Mississippi: “My first glimpse of the flat black stretches of Chicago depressed and dismayed me, mocked all my fantasies. Chicago seemed an *unreal city* whose mythical houses were built of slabs of black coal wreathed in palls of gray smoke, houses whose foundations were sinking slowly into the dank prairie.”¹⁵ The passage powerfully echoes Eliot’s “Unreal City” and his explicitly comparative and global perspective on world war as the nightmarish consequence of empire building in *The Waste Land*.¹⁶ Elsewhere, in *Twelve Million Black Voices*, published four years before *Black Boy*, Wright narrated the trauma of this migration told in an accompanying sequence of FSA photographs, drawing a startling comparison with wartime Europe: “And the foreigners—Poles, Germans, Swedes, and Italians—we never dreamed that there were so many in the world! Yes, coming north for a Negro sharecropper involves more strangeness than going to another

country. It is the beginning of living on a new and terrifying plane of consciousness.... Even in times of peace some of the neighborhoods in which we live look as though they had been subjected to an intensive and prolonged aerial bombardment.”¹⁷

Whereas, in *Black Boy*, Wright recalled Eliot’s formal innovations to represent the condition of African Americans migrating to the unreal waste land of Chicago, in *The Outsider*, which Wright completed in Paris in 1947, the nihilistic protagonist, Cross Damon, elaborates the significance of rat symbolism which was, as I’ve suggested, initially inspired by Eliot’s poem. Here, Damon addresses the vexed relationship between the oppression of blacks, on the one hand, and, on the other, the liberatory projects and promises of political parties who are just using ideological banners for their own cynical purposes and will to power: “Today governments, democratic or totalitarian...are the exploiters of the millions of rats caught in the industrial trap. The end-results of their rule is that they keep the lives of their rats pitched to a mean, sordid level of consciousness.... To keep their rats contented, they strive to convince them that their rats’ lives are more glorious, better, richer than at any time in history, and, in the end, they come to believe in their own lies.... The only real enemies of this system are not the rats themselves, but those outsiders who are conscious of what is happening and who seek to change the consciousness of the rats who are being controlled.”¹⁸

Earlier, I mentioned that Wright titled the third part of his novel “Rat’s Alley,” an allusion to the second part of *The Waste Land*, when Eliot implicitly compares a back alley in an urban setting with a World War I trench in the Somme sector. In lines that directly follow those used by Wright as his epigraph in *Lawd Today!*, Eliot elaborates this rat imagery:

A rat crept softly through the vegetation
 Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
 While I was fishing in the dull canal
 On a winter evening round behind the gashouse
 Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
 And on the king my father's death before him.
 White bodies naked on the low damp ground
 And bones cast in a little low dry garret,
 Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year.¹⁹

In Eliot, this rendering of a rat is memorable for its precision, as well as rich suggestiveness, commingling hints of urban poverty, the carnage of war, racial violence, and lost paternity, among other possible meanings. There is, as Grover Smith has noted, also an allusion to Joyce's "obese grey rat" as a symbol of corruption in *Ulysses*, and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a play centrally concerned with the significance of tradition and the relation of the Old World to the New.²⁰ The lost bones, which poignantly signified the forgotten suffering and sacrifice of lives in Rat's Alley, and which might have been transmuted to Ezekiel's prophetic vision of dry bones as resurrection and restoration, are here instead cast away and hidden in an obscure attic garret, remembered only when they are rattled by the rat. Wright's recollection of these rattling dry bones and other passages from *The Waste Land* demonstrates that, at the very outset of his career as a writer, he was intensely aware and admiring of the richness and complexity of imagery in Eliot's modernism, even though this would have contradicted the views of prominent members of the Communist Party, including the popular proletarian novelist, editor, and literary critic Michael Gold, who, as founding editor of *The New Masses*, derided and rejected modernist literary techniques as bourgeois "literary idiocy" which "only reflects the madness of the whole system of capitalist values."²¹

As Brannon Costello informs us, Wright's involvement with the leftist journal, the *Partisan Review*, during the 1930s should thus be closely examined as an illuminating context for understanding the presence of modernist influence in his work.²² Costello and Harvey Teres have shown that William Phillips and Philip Rahv, two influential editors of the *Partisan Review*, strongly supported the use of modernist formal innovations, in addition to the pioneering stylistic advances of social realists writing in the tradition of Dreiser. Like Wright, who served as associate editor of the journal in 1936, they favored "an unprecedented degree of autonomy, tolerance, and rigor for literature and criticism...within left discourse; and...the creation of a compelling...union between modernism and political radicalism."²³ The influence of Eliot's *The Waste Land* extends to Wright's neglected, Whitmanesque, early protest poems—about 20 in all—composed during this period and published in leftist magazines. Michel Fabre has observed Eliot's influence on "Transcontinental," a poem dedicated to Louis Aragon, and published in *International Literature* in 1936.²⁴ Or consider these lines from "Between the World and Me," which appeared in *Partisan Review* in the summer of 1935, where Wright renders his speaker's awakening to shocked horror at a lynching, and a fear so intense that the observer of the scene becomes one with the victim, remembering, once again, dry bones rattled into life:

And while I stood my mind was frozen with cold pity
 for the life that was gone.
 The ground gripped my feet and my heart was circled by
 icy walls of fear—
 [...]
 The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves
 into my bones.
 The grey ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into
 my flesh.²⁵

Composing *Haiku: This Other World*, two decades after he first used the epigraph from Eliot's *The Waste Land* at the outset of his career, Wright's interest in Japanese Buddhism, haiku poetry, and transpacific interculturality would have rendered Eliot's work more centrally relevant than ever. He would have recalled, for example, Eliot's compelling remark about the importance of East-West dialogue in his footnote to the juxtaposition of fragments from Augustine and Buddhist scripture in *The Waste Land*: "The collocation of these two representatives of eastern and western asceticism, as the culmination of this part of the poem, is not an accident."²⁶ The influence of Eliot's modernism in *The Waste Land* for the development of Wright's own intercultural poetics in *Haiku: This Other World* can be illustrated by examining how, contrasting starkly with Cross Damon's long, burdensomely explicit excursus on the rat as a symbol of the exploited proletariat, Wright's brief, suggestive haiku-inspired poems about rats in the collection, of which there are many, avoid any explanatory statements of cause and effect, or what Pound would call "debased" modes of symbolism.²⁷ In 1928, Eliot praised Pound's *Cathay*, saying that it contributed to Pound's "steady effort towards the synthetic construction of a style of speech" and, I contend, this approach is as applicable to Pound's haiku-inspired imagist poems as it is to Wright's "projections in the haiku manner."²⁸ In other words, we should not condemn the poems in *This Other World* when they do not conform to traditional conventions of haiku, because Wright, like Pound, turned to haiku in order to "rethink the nature of an English poem," as Hugh Kenner once put it.²⁹

I will conclude with two poems from *This Other World* that depict tooth-marks and the sound of a rat gnawing:

On winter mornings
The candle shows faint markings
Of the teeth of rats. (Haiku 21)

The sound of a rat
Gnawing in the winter wall
Of a rented room. (Haiku 453)

In addition to all the other contexts I have discussed up to this point, Wright's evocation of "gnawing" hunger, combined with the poet-speaker's isolation in a rented room, suggest that the poem should also be read in connection with another recollection of Eliot passage from Part II of Wright's *Black Boy*, which was posthumously published in 1977 as *American Hunger*. Here Wright reflects on "the hunger for life that gnaws on us all," and his fundamental task as a writer to bridge, through intercultural dialogue, a divide that segregated him from the "unreal" world of white America, and to affirm a shared, universal human condition: "Humbly now, with no vaulting dream of achieving a vast unity, I wanted to try to build a bridge of words between me and that world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal. I would hurl words into this darkness..., and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would...create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human."³⁰

Rats in Eliot's poems often function as controversial racist symbols, and are confined and concealed in segregated urban spaces, such as alleys, cellars, and basements.³¹ By contrast, in *Haiku: This Other World*, Wright revises and redeems Eliot's symbolism, endowing rats with universally human connotative possibilities. Composing his haiku-inspired poetry about hunger in an attempt to unify black and white America, Wright also sought to affirm unity with the decolonizing world that was just

emerging, and to expand possibilities for East-West dialogue, as seen in a note from his journal about his experience, in April 1955, at the historic Bandung Conference in Indonesia, which brought together twenty-nine Asian and African nations: “They made me know that I too was Western. What bridges could be built between these two worlds?”³² Insofar as Wright’s “projections in the haiku manner” mediate and heal social divisions, he will have fulfilled his primary purpose as an artist.

¹ Michel Fabre, *Richard Wright: Books and Writers* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1990), 14, 75, 156.

² Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. Isabel Barzun, 2nd ed. (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993) 510; Floyd Ogburn, "Richard Wright's Unpublished Haiku: A World Elsewhere," *MELUS* 23.3 (August 1998), 57.

³ Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, 520-21; Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 491, 518.

⁴ Julia Wright, "Introduction," *Haiku: This Other World*, ed. Y. Hakutani and R. Tener (New York: Arcade, 1998), viii, x.

⁵ Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright, Daemoniac Genius* (New York: Amistad, 1988), 313.

⁶ For a discussion of Pound's possible influence on Wright, their shared interest in different translations of the same classic haiku poem by Arakida Moritake, and how Wright's haiku-inspired poetry bears a marked similarity to Pound's as well as to Moritake's, see Yoshinobu Hakutani, *Wright and Haiku* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2014), 109; Hakutani, *Haiku and Modernist Poetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 76, 118; Hakutani, "Richard Wright's Haiku and Modernist Poetics," *Traveling Texts and the Work of Afro-Japanese Cultural Production*, ed. W. H. Bridges and N. Cornyetz (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 100; Hakutani, "Wright's Haiku, Zen, and the African 'Primal Outlook,'" *The Other World of Richard Wright: Perspectives on his Haiku*, ed. J. Zheng (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2011), 12; and Hakutani, *East-West Literary Imagination: Cultural Exchanges from Yeats to Morrison* (Columbia: U of Missouri Press, 2017), 144-145.

⁷ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (III), *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, vol. I, ed. C. Ricks and J. McCue (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2015), 62; Craig Werner, *Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1996), 190.

⁸ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (III), *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, 66.

⁹ Frances Dickey, "T. S. Eliot and the Color Line of St. Louis," *Modernism/Modernity*, forthcoming.

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (II), *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, 59, 632; Peter Chasseaud, *Rats Alley: Trench Names of the Western Front* (The History Press, 2017); Brannon Costello, "Richard Wright's *Lawd Today* and the Political Uses of Modernism," *African American Review* 37.1 (Spring 2003), 39-52; Don B. Graham, "Lawd Today and the Example of *The Waste Land*," *CLA Journal* 17 (1974), 329.

¹¹ Tatsuo Murata, "Buddhism in T. S. Eliot," *The Modern Schoolman* 73 (November 1995), 18-19.

¹² W. E. B. Du Bois and Martha Gruening, "The Massacre of East St. Louis," *The Crisis* 14.5 (September 1917), 220.

¹³ W. E. B. Du Bois, "The African Roots of War," *Monthly Review* (May 1915); Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (London: Verso, 2016), 49.

¹⁴ Richard Wright, *Lawd Today, Later Works*, ed. R. Rampersad (New York: Library of America, 1991), 192-193.

¹⁵ Wright, *Black Boy, Later Works*, 249 (emphasis added).

¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (V), *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, 63, 69.

-
- ¹⁷ Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (1941, New York: Basic Books, 2008), 99, 114.
- ¹⁸ Wright, *The Outsider, Later Works*, 759-760.
- ¹⁹ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (III), *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, 62.
- ²⁰ Grover Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1974), 84.
- ²¹ Craig Werner, *Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1994), 190; Michael Gold, "Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot," *The New Masses* (1934), *Change the World!* (New York: International Publishers, 1936), 26.
- ²² Brannon Costello, "Richard Wright's 'Lawd Today!' and the Political Uses of Modernism," *African American Review* 37.1 (Spring 2003), 42.
- ²³ Costello, "Richard Wright's 'Lawd Today!' and the Political Uses of Modernism," 43-44; Harvey M. Teres, *Reviewing the Left: Politics, Imagination, and the New York Intellectuals* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), 41-42.
- ²⁴ Michel Fabre, "The Poetry of Richard Wright," *Critical Essays on Richard Wright*, ed. Y. Hakutani (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1982), 256.
- ²⁵ Wright, "Between the World and Me," *Partisan Review* 2 (July-August, 1935), 18-19.
- ²⁶ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (III), *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, 75.
- ²⁷ Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (1916, New York: New Directions, 1970), 89.
- ²⁸ T. S. Eliot, "Introduction to Selected Poems, by Ezra Pound, ed. T. S. Eliot," *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: A Critical Edition: Literature, Politics, Belief*, ed. F. Dickey, J. Formichelli, and R. Schuchard, vol. 3 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP), 521.
- ²⁹ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1971), 199.
- ³⁰ Wright, *Black Boy, Later Works*, 365.
- ³¹ Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 2, 22, 46, 80.
- ³² Qtd. in Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, 465.