Locating *This Other World:*

Toward an Intertextual Reading of Richard Wright's Haiku Poetry

by

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Abstract

In the novels for which he is best known, African American author Richard Wright wrestles with questions of race, society, and nature, and explores these themes as they pertain to his own experiences. In his semi-autobiographical novel *Black Boy*, one of his most famous works, he tracks his progression from boyhood into young adulthood and his changing relationship to the landscape of the American south. While Wright's reputation as a socially-minded novelist is well-established, his oeuvre contains several experimental works that are far lesser known. One which has been largely overlooked by Wright scholars and critics is a collection of over 800 haiku, which he penned in the eighteen months preceding his death in 1960.

Collected and posthumously published in the book *Haiku: This Other World*, these slight poems see Wright engaging with nature in a way that is both similar to and different than his earlier ventures. While the form of the haiku restricts Wright to pared down, straightforward language, knowledge of his previous work enables an intertextual reading of the poetry that allows for the identification of thematic similarities despite formal differences. In this thesis, I argue that an understanding of Wright's body of work and his previous engagements with the theme of nature is essential to reading his haiku. I examine the role of nature in his haiku as related to *Black Boy* in order to establish the definition of "nature" that Wright is interested in, concluding that his "nature" is one that is intimately tied to the social and political forces that he sees as inextricable parts of natural landscapes. Understanding this, a reader is better equipped to examine the ways in which he uses the form of the haiku to approach subjects that he has engaged with in past work in a new way.

Keywords: *Black Boy*, English-language Haiku, Intertextuality, Richard Wright

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Introduction

From his early childhood in rural Mississippi in the 1910s until his eventual death in Paris in 1960, Richard Wright's life and literary career were marked by an acute awareness of the political and racial dynamics that shaped his experience of the world around him. For example, one of his most well-known books, 1941's autobiographical novel *Black Boy*, depicts the way in which he was often forced to "feel and think out each tiny item of racial experience" in order to survive in a Southern landscape that was dominated by white men (Wright 215). He wrote of racial dynamics in the United States with such intensity (and in such a contentious manner) that James Baldwin, referring to Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son,* called his books "protest novels" – a comment that was not meant as a compliment.[1] Wright was a communist, heavily involved in the Communist party in Chicago in the 1930s until he became disenchanted with what he perceived as a neglect of racial issues among party members. In 1944, he was put on the FBI's security list because his writing drew suspicions that he was linked to what the Hoover administration called "'racialists' intent on undermining the US government" (Ward 129). He lived out the last years of his life in self-imposed exile in France, fearing the repercussions that an America mired in McCarthyism would have on his livelihood and wellbeing. After a life that was shaped by the politics he was involved in, he is now widely remembered as a writer whose literature was firmly grounded in an exploration of racism and what it meant to be black in America.

A hiccup in this narrative arises in the work produced during the last eighteen months of Wright's life. While living in self-imposed exile in France, he suffered from various illnesses

[1] In one of Baldwin's essays, "Everybody's Protest Novel," he directly criticizes *Native Son* and its characterization of African Americans. For more, see Kim.

that left him weak and intermittently bedbound until his eventual death in 1960. During that time, he began to compose haiku poetry. His daughter Julia remembers: “He was never without his haiku binder under his arm. He wrote them everywhere, at all hours: in bed as he slowly recovered from a year-long, grueling battle with amebic dysentery; in cafés and restaurants where he counted syllables on napkins; in the country in a writing community owned by friends” (vii).

The range of poems in *This Other World* reflects the prolonged engagement and sustained interest in the form that Julia Wright speaks of. While they are all grounded in nature-based imagery, the tones of the poems vary, and they serve as snapshots of many different moments in nature defined by many different emotional qualities. They are sometimes painful or gruesome:

A bloated dead cat
emerging from melting snow
on a tenement roof. (755)

and sometimes cold, grim, or poverty-stricken.

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

But they are also hopeful, amusing, and warmly domestic:

A nude fat woman
Stands over a kitchen stove,
Tasting applesauce. (436)

And many are playful or interrogative.

O black rattlesnake,

Why in all hell did you choose

This path to sleep in? (234)

Regardless of any variation in tone among the poems themselves, one thing is consistent: in the arc of his career, and with regard to the accepted public image of Wright, his haiku do not seem to fit. Writing about them, critic Sandy Alexandre speaks of "Wright's haiku - that seemingly oxymoronic juxtaposition" (247). These poems appear to be everything that Wright and his most well-known works are not – apolitical, self-contained, and separate from the social sphere. As such, the haiku present a challenge to the reader of Wright: how does one understand the work of an author that seems so different from the rest of his corpus? Perhaps unsurprisingly, Wright's haiku went unpublished until 1998, nearly four decades after his death. The book *Haiku: This Other World* is a collection of 817 of the roughly four thousand poems he composed, and selections are based on a manuscript compiled by Wright shortly before he died.[2]

In their slightness, these poems are easily taken as trivial or as afterthoughts to Wright's more famous works, and most scholars tend to relegate them to a position of unimportance and considering them to be corollary to his main body of work. Those critics who do not completely dismiss or ignore the haiku engage with it in a polarized manner, focusing either on its adherence to classical Japanese standards or arguing that it completely breaks from the sense of "oneness" that is central to Japanese haiku.[3]

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[2] After completing this manuscript, Wright sent it to William Targ, a publisher and friend, "both to ask his advice as a friend and to find out his editorial reactions. He did not expect them to be a commercial success… but he felt a need for them to be read" (Fabre 509).

[3] Haiku, as a poetic genre, traces its origins back to the 17th century. Its rich history is closely associated with several key figures (chief among them "haiku masters" such as Bashō, Buson, and Issa). For more on the history and formal constraints of the haiku genre, see Louis, Ungar, and Yasuda.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I will examine the critical conversation surrounding Wright's haiku, and I will attempt to make sense of the respective shortcomings of each of the dominant approaches. I will draw on Raymond Williams' work *Keywords* in order to interrogate what critics mean when they speak of "nature" in Wright's haiku; in so doing, I aim to uncover how their definitions might compare with Wright's own understanding of what nature is. Using *Black Boy* as a way to inform Wright's use of the term, I will identify a definition of nature that is applicable to the haiku and sourced from Wright's own corpus. This definition is one which acknowledges the social aspects of nature and the inseparability of that which is considered "natural" and that which is thought to be of the human/social world.

After turning to *Black Boy* to make sense of the portrayal of nature in *This Other World,* I will use the novel to perform intertextual readings of several haiku. Through these intertextual readings, I will examine how the trouble of reading haiku might be breached by an awareness of Wright as a writer and thinker, and by an understanding of the themes of his novels and essays. My second chapter focuses on these questions and develops intertextual readings of specific poems from *This Other World.* My goal with these readings is to demonstrate how an informed approach to the poetry allows for an analysis that is more far-reaching and more complete than the analyses of critics who do not take an intertextual approach.

In this way, I propose a solution to the "problem of reading" that the haiku poems present. Rather than an oxymoronic anomaly, they represent an opportunity: an opportunity for Wright to explore the themes of his novels and previous works from a new angle, and to integrate those themes into a new poetic form. In my third chapter, I will consider how my redefinition of nature and my use of intertextual readings enhances an understanding of the thematic arc of *This Other World*. Drawing on my first two chapters as well as Wright's 1937

essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” I will establish the ways in which Wright’s haiku, especially considered in terms of nature and intertextuality, are in line with his previous work such that they expand upon his preexisting interest in and engagement with issues of race. I wish to show that the use of this specific poetic form allows Wright to think about old themes in a new way, and that his haiku ultimately synthesizes his previous work while pushing old themes forward into new realms of understanding.

Chapter 1: Defining Nature for Wright and His Critics

Upon first read, Wright's haiku poetry evokes sensorial (and often serene) images of fleeting moments in nature. The vast majority of the poems in *This Other World* are characterized by an intense specificity and attention to detail: it is as if Wright is taking the lens of a camera to the natural world around him and recording in faithfully-transcribed detail all that he witnesses. Consider the following selection of poems:

> the caw of a crow
> loops over a sunburnt hill
> And fills a valley. (237)
>
> On the pond's bottom
> The faint shadow of a fish
> Flitting on white sand. (102)
>
> One magnolia
> Landed upon another
> In the dew-wet grass. (50)

A peaceful account of nature that is based in concrete imagery is the foundation of each poem, whether that image is one of "a sunburnt hill," "the faint shadow of a fish," or "dew-wet grass." Under their simple surfaces, however, lay a tangle of questions surrounding how one might read these poems. When considered alongside Wright's larger body of work and the overtly political themes that characterize many of his novels, the haiku come to present a serious problem of reading. How does one contend with seemingly apolitical poetry that comes from someone who

is most well-known for their politically-influenced work? Unsurprisingly, Wright's poems are often categorized as thematically and tonally different from his novels. At best, they are taken as evidence of a new literary direction in which he headed in the later years of his life. At worst, they are seen as insignificant afterthoughts to a politically charged career.

To contend with the problems that these haiku present, an understanding of the role of nature in Wright's poetry is of paramount importance. In his foundational 1976 book *Keywords,* scholar Raymond Williams identifies the mutability and diversity of social and literary understandings of nature, and writes that "nature is perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language" (184). He notes that some of nature's many definitions might include "a universal directing power," a "primary but also recurrent force… teaching a singular goodness", or something "contrasted with what had been made of man, or what man had made of himself" (186-188). *This Other World* is often discussed in terms of its invocation of nature imagery, but an investigation into what "nature" might mean to Wright is largely missing from the critical conversation surrounding his poetry. Instead, critics project onto Wright's haiku understandings of nature that are not informed by his own work.

When it comes to interpretations of the haiku, critics tend to split into two distinct camps.[4] Scholar Sandy Alexandre identifies these parties in her essay "Culmination in Miniature: Late Style and the Essence of Richard Wright's Haiku." One party, which she labels the "Zen Buddhist camp," considers Wright's haiku in relation to Japanese poets such as Buson or Bashō.[5] The other party, the "social activist critics," focuses on the implications of a turn away from nature in his poetry, and examine how such a turn might align his haiku with the

[4] I am careful here not to overstate the critical conversation surrounding Wright's haiku: while it is lively for what it is, the number of scholars who have engaged with the work is relatively small.

[5] Some of the greatest poets of Japan's *Edo* Period (1603-1868), and among the most famous masters of the haiku form. For more, see Yasuda.

social and political themes of his earlier work.

"Zen Buddhist" scholars perform readings of Wright's poetry that engage with the concerns and formal conventions of traditional Japanese poets, for whom the act of writing haiku was intimately tied to Zen Buddhist traditions. As such, they are also interested in a more Zen-based definition of nature and the natural world. For them, to write about nature is to experience and convey "the unity and harmony of all things" in the world (Hakutani, "Nature, Haiku, and 'This Other World'" 270). Within the Zen tradition, human experience and nature are seen to be oppositional forces, which stand in contrast to each other rather than being mutually informative. Thus, "a classic haiku, while it shuns human-centered emotions, thrives upon… a nature-centered feeling" (Hakutani, "Nature, Haiku, and 'This Other World'" 273). This is to say that nature and its essence is something that can be captured in poetry only when a poet abandons their own emotions, feelings, and judgments, and in doing so shuns their own subjectivity in order to achieve an objective view of the world around them. The approach of these critics usually contains some form of the idea that, as scholar Yoshinobu Hakutani puts it, through haiku "Wright turned away from the moral, intellectual, social, and political problems dealt with in his prose work and found in nature his latent poetic sensibility" ("Nature, Haiku, and 'This Other World'" 261). In his haiku, they see Wright rejecting emotion in favor of a more objective and emotionally detached depiction of nature.

The Zen interpretation of Wright's haiku loses some credibility in the face of his limited knowledge of Zen Buddhism - according to biographer Michel Fabre, the most exposure that Wright had to Japanese criticism was through conversations with acquaintances and his study of R.H. Blyth's 1964 *Haiku* volumes, which provided a general survey of the history of the form

interspersed with well-known poetry by Japanese masters.[6] Critic Toru Kiuchi writes that "Wright tried to have a full understanding of the practice of Zen" and that he "also tried to extract the essence of Zen out of haiku and maxims that Blyth had quoted in *Haiku*" (30). Unfortunately, Blyth's volumes could not serve as substitutes for the lifelong study of Zen Buddhism that served as the basis for the haiku of poets such as Buson or Bashō, to whom these critics wish to compare Wright. As such, Wright's poetry often contradicts those essential elements of haiku which were based upon Zen ideals: for example, Wright's haiku are often subjective, with a clear authorial presence, while a Zen tradition encourages "a condition of selflessness… in which things are seen without reference to profit or loss" and the identity of the poet falls away (Kiuchi 34). Consider the following poems by Wright:

> "Shut up, you crickets!
> How can I hear what my wife
> Is saying to me?" (10)
>
> A spring moon so round
> That my fingers are itching
> To touch its sharp edge. (289)

In these poems, counter to the Zen tradition, the author's presence is clear, as is his subjective view of nature. With this in mind, it is hard to see *why* a Zen understanding of nature would be applicable to Wright's work.

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[6] On the origins of Wright's interest in haiku, Floyd Ogburn writes, "It appears that Wright's study of haiku began in 1959 on the advice of a young South African who loved haiku and described it to Wright. Fascinated by what he had learned from his friend, Wright borrowed and studied Blyth's *Haiku*, a work of four volumes" (Ogburn 60).

A similar problem arises with the "opposing" camp of critics, who Alexandre calls the "social activist camp." These scholars disagree with the "turn to nature" reading of Wright's haiku that the "Zen Buddhist" critics emphasize. Instead, they argue that the poems are thematically continuous with his earlier work, and that through haiku Wright expresses his social interests by portraying his own estrangement from nature. They tie the poems to Wright's cultural and political interests and are more concerned with the thematic elements of Wright's work than they are with its adherence (or lack thereof) to a Japanese tradition. They read a dissonance in his poetics that they interpret as a refusal of the natural world. For critic Thomas Morgan, for example, these poems "[break] apart or [invert] the… fusion between humanity and nature" and therefore "[foreground] man's separation from nature and/or nature's isolation of man" (97). In a claim that is echoed by many other "social activist" critics, he writes that they "highlight the ways in which alienation and estrangement are produced and replicated" (97).

The trouble here arises in these critics' definition and understanding of nature, as it did with the Zen critics. The definition of nature that they adhere to is one in which nature represents an idealized realm separate from mankind – in the words of Williams, nature is still "the 'countryside', the 'unspoiled places', plants and creatures other than man" (223). The social activist critics employ the same understanding of nature as the Zen critics, and merely situate Wright differently in relation to it. Rather than representing the spiritual fusion of human beings with nature that Yasuda and likeminded critics emphasize, these critics argues that the poems are proof of alienation. Still, the foundational understanding of nature as unity, harmony, and escape is common across both parties.

Consumed by either their own traditions of Japanese Zen understandings of the natural world or ideas of dissonance with nature, neither camp critically examines what nature might

mean for Wright himself. Instead, they assume definitions of the natural which are ultimately incompatible with his world and his work. In his writing on the term nature, Williams arrives at the conclusion that "nature is a word which carries, over a very long period, many of the major variations of human thought… it is necessary to be especially aware of its difficulty" (189). Considering Williams alongside Wright would suggest that, in order to fully understand his haiku and their relationship to nature, it is necessary to ascertain what Wright's historic understanding of nature is. Especially since this is a key term and point of analysis for the main critics that have engaged with his haiku, it seems a particularly relevant question.

In her introduction to *This Other World*, Wright's daughter Julia reflects on the end of her father's life and his composition of haiku poetry. She writes that the haiku represents "a form of poetry which links seasons of the soul with nature's cycle of moods [and] enabled him to reach out to the black boy part of himself still stranded in a South that continued to live in his dreams" (xi). Found in the introduction to the only available collection of the haiku, Julia Wright's quote suggests that there is something more to the poetry than either critical camp indicates - something beyond the purely sensorial quality which is initially easily accessible in the poems. The phrases "seasons of the soul" and "nature's cycle of moods" indicate that she reads something more than pure nature imagery in her father's poetry: she seems to be suggesting that nature, for Wright, is not just about what may traditionally be considered "natural phenomena," but is also about the deeply human emotions that those phenomena evoke. With this introduction, a reader of Wright's poetry is primed to think about the ways in which his poems expand the idea of "nature" to encompass more than obvious "nature imagery" (such as the crow, the pond, and the magnolia of the above poems). In her reference to the "black boy parts of himself," Julia Wright also directly invokes Wright's 1945 novel *Black Boy*, the first section of which deals in

depth with Wright's relationship to the American South.

In order to establish how Wright thinks about the theme of nature, I turn to *Black Boy*. This novel in particular is significant for its semi-autobiographical quality and its engagement with the theme of nature: in its pages, Wright aims to present himself through his coming into understanding of the world around him. This involves an acknowledgment of the influence of his race and his poverty on his ability to survive in the South. Throughout the book, nature is seen not as an idealized form but as something that is deeply tied to human emotion and human experience, and which therefore symbolizes a melding together of the human and non-human. From *Black Boy*, a description of nature:

> There was the teasing and impossible desire to imitate the petty pride of sparrows wallowing and flouncing in the red dust of country roads.
>
> There was the yearning for identification loosed in me by the sight of a solitary ant carrying a burden upon a mysterious journey…
>
> There was the speechless astonishment of seeing a hog stabbed through the heart, dipped into boiling water, scraped, split open, gutted, and strung up gaping and bloody. (14)

In these passages, nature is not a distant, primal force of good, nor does it stand in contrast to the human world and Wright's experience of himself. Instead, the nature around him is defined by his reaction to it. In the "petty pride" of sparrows he identifies an emotion that he wants for himself, and feels that they are "teasing" him because of his inability to feel that emotion. The sight of a wandering ant sparks in him an awareness of his own trouble identifying with the world around him, and a yearning for that which he is unable to experience – presumably, he sees similarities between the solitary ant navigating the world and his own

journey. The depiction of the hog is consumed by descriptions of the steps involved in preparing it as food – as it is "scraped, split open, gutted, and strung up," Wright demonstrates just how much the natural can be tied to and defined by human actions.

This relationship in the passage above between nature and that which might be considered "human" demonstrates how the uncomfortable, the painful, and the gruesome sides of nature are acknowledged in Wright's work. It does not mean, however, that nature is never beautiful or enjoyable for him. The following passage helps crystallize the complex role of nature in his life and his work by showing the joy and sense of belonging that it also evokes:

> There was the drenching hospitality in the pervading smell of sweet magnolias. There was the aura of limitless freedom distilled from the rolling sweep of tall green grass swaying and glinting in the wind and sun…. (54)

Contained in a long list of pleasant experiences from his childhood, these suggest some of the lighter aspect of nature for Wright. The "hospitality" of the magnolias suggests a welcoming, a way in which the flowers make him feel at home and in communion with the natural world around him. The "grass," "wind," and "sun," which all conspire to create an image of limitlessness and freedom, seem here to contain no ill will towards the narrator. Defined by their "distilled aura," they are just as important in what they suggest – and the emotions they evoke – as they are in their physical reality.

All of this serves to illuminate Wright's complex relationship to the American south. Julia Wright writes that her father's use of nature imagery revealed how images of the countryside simultaneously "reminded him of the physical hunger he had experienced as a poor black child in one of the world's most fertile landscapes" while also "[enabling] him to come to terms with the difficult beauty of the earth…" (xi). Nature can be harmful and painful while also

being beautiful and revelatory; it can be drenched in “hospitality” even as it invokes bitter feelings of “impossible desire”. In fact, it is the fact of harm being couched in that which is also enjoyable that makes Wright’s expression of nature so compelling.

From all of this, it stands to reason that Wright’s definition of nature, in its broadest sense, encompasses the natural landscape, the forces that act upon it, the way that it is used and understood by people, and the way that it effects them. It is, crucially, equally effected by human and non-human forces. This means that an understanding of wildlife, of hills and fields and forests, of the “sunburnt hill” and “white sand” that he so vividly portrays in his haiku, also considers the way that those things play on human emotion, the way they are used by humans, and the way that social structures might influence an individual’s experience of them. It means that nature might be located just as much in a city street as it is in a field or a pond. It means that the butchered hog being prepared for a meal is just as much a part of “nature” as a wild hog roaming the woods, and that the “nature” of both of those images is inextricably tied to the way that they relate to and create meaning for humans.

Such an understanding of nature can also be found in Wright’s haiku, which indicates that they are about more than just nature as the Zen Buddhist and social activist critics understand it. The following poem, the first in *This Other World*, has been studied by both critical parties. Here, a juxtaposition of their readings with one that acknowledges Wright’s complex understanding of nature reveals the differences between the three approaches.

I am nobody:

A red sinking autumn sun

Took my name away. (1)

In his reading of this poem, social activist critic Richard Iadonisi describes “an overt and

menacing disjunction between the narrative 'I' and contingent reality," and argues that "implicit in the involuntary loss of identity and disembodiment is a sense of violence" ("'Like Ray Charles Is to Country': Otherness and the American Haiku" 117). Other critics of the same camp tend to agree that this poem is one of loss: for example, Robert Tener writes that with this poem Wright "turns the red autumn sun into a symbol, perhaps of a Western world, America, that has deprived the speaker of his name and identity" (Wright et al. 34). While their reading of social influences into the nature imagery of the poem is compelling, they ultimately hinge their understanding of the poem on the theory that social forces separate an individual from nature; in reality, they are fundamental parts of what *make up* nature for Wright.

On the other hand, "Zen Buddhist" critics associate this poem with a kind of spiritual transcendence. This can be seen in a reading by critic Sanehide Kodama, who argues that the above poem, rather than being menacingly disjointed, is "suggestive of the joy of spiritual rebirth" and of "a spiritual change of the poet" ("Japanese Influence on Wright in his Last Years" 128). In another reading of the poem, critic Toru Kiuchi suggests that "'I' in the haiku becomes selfless and nameless having the Zen state of mind" (34). What is for the social activist critics a stripping away of identity by a menacing landscape is for the Zen critics a transcendent moment of selflessness in which the narrator feels oneness with the natural landscape around him. Where a socially-oriented critic reads disconnect and violence, a critic more interested in Zen tradition sees spiritual rebirth and joy.

The fact that both interpretations are possible points to the complicated essence of Wright's literary depiction and understanding of nature. It is in its essence tied to the human experience and the built environment that we create, just as it is tied to the "unspoiled" realms of the world that are beyond the reach of human influence. This poem is important because it serves

as an introduction into this complex understanding of nature, and as the first poem in *This Other World,* it shows a reader how they might think of the definition of nature in the collection. What seems most central to an understanding of the action being presented in this poem is the final line – "took my name away." The sun here is imbued with qualities that make it not entirely of nature in a traditional sense and also not completely of the human world. Because it is a sun it is understood as something outside of humanity – a force of nature upon which our existence hinges. But in its ability to perform such a specific, targeted action, there is also something human-like about it. Somewhat confusingly, the sun is taken from universal ("the sun") to specific ("a sun"). The use of the indefinite article here indicates that a portrayal of the natural world is fundamentally tied to specific, subjective human experience for Wright. What's more, the significance of the sun of this poem lies in its impact on the narrator – that is, nature is represented as being inextricably tied to the human element of the poem, and gains significance because of the way it interacts with humanity.

Once such an understanding of nature is established, it is noticeable throughout many of Wright's haiku:

> The screech of shovels,
> Scooping snow off the sidewalks
> Deepens the cold. (282)

Here, the experience of a natural phenomenon is intensified by human influence. What "deepens the cold"? It is the "screech of shovels," and by extension the city underneath the snow and the act of shoveling – a human attempt to regulate the world in a way that shapes it to human needs. Here, nature is defined and felt in such a way that it is inseparable from the human and the urban. In the following poem, humanity and nature are also intertwined:

From the cattle truck,

An anxious cow is staring

At springtime streets. (589)

With this poem, Wright seems to be suggesting the impossibility of a nature that is "as counterweight or as solace against a harsh 'world'" (Williams 188). Instead, that "harsh world" enters into the territory of nature. Critic Scott Hicks writes that *Black Boy* "resists conventional environmentalist thinking of nature and wilderness by conflating them with images of built space" – here, too, such conflation confuses and expands a reader's understanding of the place of "nature" within the poetry (214). A cow, a species that is heavily defined by its domestication and use by humans and which is seldom associated with an untouched, "untainted" nature, is located within a "cattle truck" rather than in a more traditionally natural setting. It looks out not at a field or an idyllic natural scene but at a "springtime street." Wright positions the potentially "natural" – the animal - in captivity, and locates it within urbanity.

He also uses his own authorial presence and his perspective to introduce the idea of a subjective rather than objective nature:

Is this tiny pond

The great big lake in which

I swam as a boy? (140)

Here, the pond is defined by his experience of it and his warped understanding of it based on his perspective. As a boy, it is a "great big lake;" as a grown man, it is a "tiny pond." The significance of nature changes according to the situation of the person who perceives it.

Finally:

Gazing at her face

Reflected in the spring pond,

The girl grimaces. (52)

Within nature, humanity sees itself. When we react to nature, we are also reacting to ourselves; the two are deeply interconnected.

Chapter 2: An Intertextual Reading to Inform Wright's Haiku

Because *Black Boy* is useful as a source that informs Wright's definition of nature and his use of nature imagery in his haiku, it follows that a more explicit intertextual reading with the novel would offer increased understanding of the meaning of specific words, themes, and motifs that appear in his poetry. In an essay entitled "Inverting the Haiku Moment: Alienation, Objectification, and Mobility in Richard Wright's 'Haiku: This Other World'," scholar Thomas Morgan identifies an intertextual reading of Wright's haiku as a line of inquiry that should be "enriched and expanded" (113). Such a reading honors the thematic consistency of *Black Boy*, *This Other World*, and Wright's other work; it therefore allows for Wright's poetry to be read as commentary on the issues that he wrestles with in his earlier career. In this way, it opens his poems to new and various dimensions of meaning.

Writing about *Black Boy* as a whole, Hicks notes that Wright's prose contains "a sort of studied sense… a certain literary quality of transcription in that… observations [of nature] are simultaneously instantaneous and reflective" (213). This description is remarkably similar to how Wright's haiku might be characterized – instantaneous moments with a quality that is almost transcription-like. The following passage from *Black Boy* demonstrates this quality:

> "Each experience had a sharp meaning of its own…
>
> There was the suspense I felt when I heard the taut, sharp song of a yellow-black bee hovering nervously but patiently above a white rose…
>
> There was the all-night ache in my stomach after I had climbed a neighbor's tree and eaten stolen, unripe peaches…
>
> There was the morning when I thought I would fall dead from fear after I had stepped with my bare feet upon a bright little green garden snake" (110).

The “instantaneous” description of nature is clear here, but Hicks continues, and claims that “the text does not allow these images to stand unchallenged and uncomplicated” (213). Within each sentence is a gesture towards the “sharp meaning” of each experience that is depicted in the passage, which is a fundamental part of the nature that is being expressed. A yellow-black bee is significant not as some idea of unspoiled beauty, but because it inflicts a feeling of “suspense” in the narrator. The garden snake, though harmless in actuality, is a fearful object because this is the narrator’s response to it. The peaches on the neighbor’s tree are significant because they have become a symbol of the narrator’s hunger, and the lack that he experiences as a black child in an impoverished setting.

As in the haiku, the images in this passage of *Black Boy* are not *just* images - despite their apparent simplicity, they insist on being troubled and thoroughly thought through. An intertextual reading that invokes the specific image of the above mentioned peach tree from *Black Boy* is helpful in illustrating this point. Consider first the following haiku:

> Keep straight down this block,
>
> Then turn right where you will find
>
> A peach tree blooming. (3)

In this poem, there is an apparent disjointedness between the speaker’s surroundings and the peach tree. Isolated on its own line, the tree provides a moment of surprise – one imagines “turning right,” perhaps rounding a corner, and being confronted with it. From the familiarity and conviction of the first line and the clear direction of the second comes a turn that takes the focus of the individual off of their surroundings and onto the unexpected image of the tree. A possible reading of this poem, then, is one which takes the peach tree as something that stands apart from the presumably urban surroundings – the “block” of the neighborhood which the

narrator gives instructions about navigating.

However, to separate the peach tree and its surroundings in this way – i.e. to draw a line between natural ("peach tree") and unnatural ("block") - is to subscribe to a version of nature that Wright does not adhere to. His nature, as it functions in this haiku and elsewhere, is not one of stark contrasts between natural and cultural, but instead one that blurs the distinctions between these things. His natural world is contained by and defined by the social, and vice versa. In this sense, the tree of this poem is not separate from the block on which it is found. Although it may be a welcome relief from the familiar landscape, it is also inextricably tied to it. What might initially be read as a nature-based escape from familiar surroundings, a harbinger of the beauty and promise in nature, becomes more complicated considering Wright's understanding of nature.

Turning to *Black Boy* to as a point of intertextual analysis for this poem furthers this line of thought. The title of the novel, which was initially intended to be *American Hunger*, betrays a major theme that appears again and again in the autobiographical narrative: for the young Wright, growing up impoverished in Mississippi, hunger is a constant state of being.[7] Here, he describes the different foods he ate as a boy:

> There was the dry hot summer morning when I scratched my bare arms on briers while picking blackberries and came home with my fingers and lips stained black with sweet berry juice.
>
> There was the relish of eating my first fried fish sandwich, nibbling at it slowly and hoping that I would never eat it up.

[7] The manuscript of *Black Boy* that Wright first presented for publication was titled *American Hunger;* publishers initially expressed interest in only the first fourteen chapters of the manuscript (that which details Wright's childhood in the South). He titled this section *Black Boy*, and it was published in 1945. When the full manuscript was published together for the first time in 1991, it was titled *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (Wright, *Black Boy* 408).

> There was the all-night ache in my stomach after I had climbed a neighbor's tree and eaten stolen, unripe peaches. (46)

The peaches that appear in *Black Boy* can be used to inform a reading of haiku 3. Wright's experience of hunger is what shapes his understanding of the neighborhood peaches in the novel: they are an unexpected treat that he takes from the familiar landscape of his neighborhood, but they ultimately cause him discomfort. Drawing this connection between the peach tree of the novel and the peach tree of the haiku allows for a connection to some of the larger themes that Wright touches on in this *Black Boy* passage. Hunger is a constant presence in his young life, and throughout the narrative it comes to represent the lack of necessities that he must face as a result of his race and his poverty, as well as his desire to escape that lack. Speaking to this, Wright narrates, "Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it" (45). In response to his hunger in *Black Boy*, Wright eats "stolen" peaches that belong to his neighbor – he lives in the same landscape as all of those who are more fortunate than he is, but because of his race and his class, he does not have the same access to that landscape.

The peach tree of the novel is not a wholly painful image: it is not *just* inscribed with the experience of hunger, but is also a temporary relief from it. Ultimately, however, this passage from *Black Boy* is significant because it informs the haiku in a way that links it to patterns of racism and class struggle that contribute to the system of oppression that color Wright's Southern landscape. The passage, like the haiku, explores the fact that the peach tree, an object that might traditionally be considered something that comes from a pure, untouched "natural world," is in fact significant because of its ties to the social world that surrounds it.

Thus, some of the biggest themes of *Black Boy* emerge out of the short, image-based haiku by way of intertextual reading. Writing in *Black Boy* about a peaceful, "routine day" in his young adulthood, Wright says, "I was at peace with the world, that is, at peace in the only way in which a black boy in the South can be at peace with a world of white men" (255). This sentiment is characteristic of the general thrust of the novel: because he is black, Wright's experience of the South is one of unease, even in moments of leisure, and even as he identifies that place as his home. The world of the South is defined by the white men who are in power there, and this means that the natural world is not free of the trappings of racial hierarchy. Nature is continuously characterized as something that is tied to Wright's social experience – more specifically, the landscape of the South becomes an avenue through which he comes to understand the implications of what it means to be black. The peach tree is only one such instance of this. While none of this is explicitly referenced in haiku 3, an intertextual reading offers a lens through which to understand the stakes of the nature that Wright portrays in the poem.

Through an intertextual reading, then, an understanding of Wright's haiku that might at first seem like extrapolation gains meaning and credibility via association with his earlier works. Rather than attempting to fit his characterization of nature into the mold of other lines of thought, as both the Zen critics and the social activist critics do, it is crucial to use Wright himself, and his own work, to understand what exactly "nature" means and represents in his poetry. If nature as a term "carries, over a very long period, many of the major variations of human thought," it is fair to assume that it carries the variations of Wright's thought over time as well – that his definition of nature is not isolated and different in each of his works, but informed by all of them (Williams 224).

The following poem further demonstrates the usefulness of this approach:

Around the tree trunk,

A kitten's paw is flicking

At an absent mouse. (788)

On first read, this poem evokes the playful nature of a kitten. The figure of the "absent mouse" brings into question the usefulness the kitten's hunt – there is an implication of the futility of the kitten's chase as we come to understand that its prey is either already gone or entirely imagined. Does the mouse exist, or is it, in its absence, a fundamentally non-capturable entity? The absent mouse and the kitten (which is also largely absent from the poem – we are only given "a single paw") represent a negative relationship rather than a positive one, and the tree trunk becomes an impediment to the kitten capturing the mouse and to our witnessing of both creatures at the same time. With a mind towards Wright's understanding of nature, we understand that any component of this poem – the elusive mouse, the inanimate tree, the potentially domesticated kitten – can be considered a part of nature. Perhaps, then, this poem represents the obstruction that can occur in nature between subject and object, and the way that one's relationship to nature might serve as a barrier or point of frustration that complicates one's ability to achieve one's needs.

With an intertextual reading of *Black Boy,* additional implications emerge surrounding the specific images used here. In the opening chapter of the novel, a young Richard is told by his father to kill a kitten. He understands that his father's request is not serious, but determines to carry it out nonetheless: he writes, "I knew that he had not really meant for me to kill the kitten, but my deep hate of him urged me toward a literal acceptance of his word" (17).

I found a piece of rope, made a noose, slipped it about the kitten's neck,

> pulled it over a nail, then jerked the animal clear of the ground. It gasped, slobbered, spun, doubled, clawed the air frantically; finally its mouth gaped and its pink-white tongue shot out stiffly. (17-18)

In the trajectory of the *Black Boy* narrative, the killing of the kitten is a major event: this scene is one of the first notable instances of violence in the novel. Reading such a significant event in the novel alongside the haiku suggests several things. First, the image of the kitten and the tree is brought into question. Although the kitten in the novel is hanged from a nail, the language that Wright employs in *Black Boy* – the "rope" and "noose," for example – bring to mind a hanging or a lynching, which reminds a reader of the tree in the haiku. There is also the similarity between the image of the kitten "clawing the air frantically" in the novel and its "flicking paw" in the haiku: what may be taken as a lazy gesture in the poem takes on a new meaning when considered in this way. An intertextual reading raises the question: is the absent mouse escaped, or is it "absent" because the kitten's gestures are induced by something else altogether, as they are in *Black Boy*?

Of course, such a reading is not apparent without a knowledge of *Black Boy*, and even then it may not be the most logical conclusion for many to draw from this poem. However, rather than refuting the validity of an intertextual reading, this points to exactly the merit of such an approach for this form of poetry. Knowing the significance of the kitten in the novel, we understand the possibility of a serious undertone that might exist in this playful-seeming poem; we also recognizing how it might be read on a surface level, without knowledge of the kitten of *Black Boy.* This means that we are approaching the poem with an understanding that mimics how Wright understands nature – while appreciating the surface beauty of the poem, we are also

aware of the social forces (the themes in Wright's corpus) that may inform it and change our understanding of it.

In a reading that uses Wright's 1956 book *The Color Curtain* to analyze Wright's haiku, Richard Iadonisi further explores how the intertwined relationship between race and nature might be thought about in Wright's poetry.[8] He examines the following poem:

> The green cockleburs
>
> Caught in the thick wooly hair
>
> Of the black boy's head. (455)

Iadonisi suggests that this haiku, "with its burrs sticking to the boy's hair, draws attention to the "thick wooly hair" as a mark of shame, a racial stigmata" ("'Like Ray Charles Is to Country': Otherness and the American Haiku" 131). I would argue that the poem is not necessarily inscribed with shame, as Iadonisi claims - there is nothing inherently menacing about the burs here, nor is there anything obviously shameful about their presence. Instead, there is a tangled coexistence, a relationship that can be categorized as both troublesome and beautiful. While Iadonisi's interpretations are firmly of the "social activist" kind, his method for reaching his conclusion is nonetheless compelling. His analysis may seem like a jump – perhaps one that overly emphasizes the role of race in a way that veers towards reductive – until we consider how he is reaching his conclusions. He engages in the practice of reading Wright in the context of Wright – here, he uses the following passage from *The Color Curtain* to inform his reading of the above haiku.

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[8] This book was written after Wright attended the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955, an "international conference… held by the free countries of the third world, including Indonesia, India, Burma, and Ceylon" (Ward 195). It contains Wright's analysis and impressions of the conference as well as commentary on his perception of Indonesia.

> Wright mentions an encounter he had with a white woman. This woman came to Wright to discern if her roommate, an African American woman, was practicing voodoo. The reason for the white woman's suspicions? Her roommate was combing her hair with a can of sterno when she thought the white woman was asleep. Wright explains that the woman was straightening her hair and further explains that "It's her way of saying: 'Forgive me. I'm sorry that I'm black; I'm ashamed that my hair is not like yours'" (182-87).

Taking this quote as a way of understanding Wright's thoughts about race and the implications of an image of a black person's hair, Iadonisi excavates the racial consciousness of Wright's haiku. While Iadonisi – firmly in the social activist camp – identifies the relation between race and nature as purely estranging, his method still serves as a powerful example of the work that an intertextual reading can do. It highlights what scholar Barbara Ungar calls the haiku form's "demand that the reader participate in creating the poem" – although "all poetry to some extent invites completion by the reader," she argues that "none depends so completely upon this response a haiku" (2). The small haiku forces its reader to carefully weigh the meaning and implication of each word, and the best place to find those meanings is Wright's previous work.

Having this information from *The Color Curtain* to work with, I would argue a different reading of Wright's understanding of the cockleburs in this poem – rather than being marks of shame, they are a part of nature that becomes mingled with the boy *because* his hair has not been straightened. There is no apologizing happening in this poem, as there is in *The Color Curtain*. As is the case with many of Wright's haiku, the tone is fairly ambivalent. It is a snapshot of a moment in which race exists, nature exists, and the two things must be thought of together in

order to be fully understood. In this there are implications of estrangement such as those that Iadonisi identifies in his analysis. But there is also, in the surface-level simplicity of the poem, the wonderful ability to simply exist with nature, even if only for the breath's-length moment that it takes to read the haiku.

Chapter 3: The Implications of an Intertextual Reading

In continuing the tradition of a reading which allows Wright himself to serve as the context that informs his poetry, I turn to his 1937 essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing," which "contains a core of ideas which helped to form a foundation for Wright's work in all phases of his career" (Ward 48). Though Marxist in nature, this treatise on writing speaks directly to Wright's perception of the role of race in art.[9] In the essay (hereafter referred to as "Blueprint"), he puts forth several claims about the purpose of writing by and for African American writers. The general thrust of his argument is that, in writing by black people and in depictions of black people in writing, "the presentation of their lives, should be simple, yes; but all the complexity, the strangeness, the magic wonder of life that plays like a bright sheen over even the most sordid existence, should be there" (44). In order to depart from earlier African American literature, which Wright saw as "addressed primarily to a white audience," his new vision for "Negro writing" was meant to address the fact that "rarely has the best of this writing been addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, and aspirations" (Ward 48; Wright 38).

Locating racial themes in Wright's haiku can initially read as questionable extrapolation; is reading racial undertones in nature poetry not limiting Wright to speaking only of his race rather than allowing him a full range of literary exploration? Is it not reductive to identify intertextual references to racially charged scenes from other works in, for example, a poem about a kitten? "Blueprint," with its straightforward statements of Wright's beliefs of the ultimate purpose of writing, gives a doubtful reader confidence that such a reading is not only possible,

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[9] Although I will not focus on the communist themes in the essay, they are important to note: "Since Wright was a seriously committed communist in 1937, he also stressed the need for Negro literature to have a political function as an important weapon in the liberation of black people and elsewhere" (Ward 48). For more on Wright's relationship with communism, see Ward 252-253.

but ultimately helpful in understand the significance of Wright's choice of the haiku form. If we do for each poem what we have done for the term "nature" – that is, critically examine its implications and its location and significance in Wright's corpus – the tiny poems bloom into something much greater, and each is seen as a nexus upon which the many threads of Wright's larger body of work meet and intersect. By reading them in this way, we discover the full extent to which the haiku in *This Other World*, as Sandy Alexandre puts it, "[enlarge] the vision of what African American literature [can] be and do" (30).

In "Blueprint," Wright identifies what he calls "innovation" in African American writing as one of its most important attributes. In innovative writing, he says, "the old accepted attitude of following precedent can lead nowhere… respect for past standards hinders rather than helps" (39). In this vein, he also argues that a "fruitful point of departure" from convention is much more meaningful "than a mere recounting of past achievements" (39). This is a value that his own work embodies: departure from convention is a common theme in his writing. Novels like *Black Boy* and 1940's *Native Son*, for example, use vivid prose and poetic language to address questions of nature and race. His novel *Lawd Today!*, which incorporates material such as news bulletins and song lyrics into his prose, is considered by some critics an example of "political modernism" and blends together those "needs, sufferings, and aspirations" of black people that he mentions in "Blueprint" with stylistic experimentation (Costello 41).[10] Similarly, his 1941 book *12 Million Black Voices* combines his written work with photographs depicting the lives of African American people during the Great Migration in a way that pushes on poetic and genre

[10] Written before *Black Boy* (1945) and *Native Son* (1940), *Lawd Today!* was published in 1963, three years after Wright's death.

conventions and "uses an extremely emotional, poetic tone to stress his solidarity with and compassion for his people" (Ward 377).[11]

In all of these instances, Wright creates unique avenues of exploration into questions surrounding race by way of stylistic experimentation. Once this trend towards thematic and formal innovation is acknowledged, his haiku can be read in the context of innovation rather than in the context of other traditions (i.e. Zen Buddhism). Putting them in conversation with texts like *Black Boy* (instead of, for example, the Japanese poetry that "Zen Buddhist" critics compare them to) lends credence not only to the idea that they are engaging in the same questions that those texts are, but also that they are using the same method – through literary innovation, they are probing at those "needs, sufferings, and aspirations" of black people that, according to Wright, are rarely given enough attention.

Without an intertextual reading, a reader risks falling into the kind of thinking that Kodama exhibits in his book *American Poetry and Japanese Culture*. Focusing only on a Zen Buddhist approach, Kodama writes that the haiku is a departure from Wright's novels, which he labels "the outlet for his violent, African American consciousness" ("Japanese Influence on Wright in his Last Years" 127-128). The racism implicit in this statement is clear: the "African American consciousness" that Kodama reads into the obviously racially-charged work of Wright's earlier career is conflated with violence and is seen as the weaker counterpoint to the supposedly non-racialized view of nature that the Zen critics locate in the haiku. An understanding of Wright's takes on nature and race, with help from "Blueprint" and earlier novels like *Black* Boy, disproves such an argument. Wright is not seeking escape from a

[11] The "Great Migration" refers to the movement of African American people out of the rural south and into more urban areas in the North, West, and Midwest regions of America. *12 Million Black Voices* particularly focuses on photography from the Great Depression (1929-1939).

"violent" consciousness that is tied to his race; rather, with the haiku he once again finds a way to express the importance and implications of race through a new literary form.

In fact, while the Zen Buddhist critics try to read Wright in tandem with Japanese haiku, poet Lee Gurga makes the point that, by Japanese standards, many of his poems would not even be considered haiku. While Wright (usually) employs a 5-7-5 syllable count, he does not otherwise adhere to the "fundamental techniques" that make up Japanese haiku, which include rules surrounding "form, nature reference, reference to a particular event," the use of the "present rather than the past tense" – the list goes on (170). In further disproving the Zen Buddhist approach, this point also emphasizes the need to read Wright in the context of himself; what he is doing is haiku perhaps only in name, and is informed most heavily by his own tradition. Gurga concedes that those poems which do not meet traditional haiku criteria – the "failed haiku," as he calls them - can nonetheless be taken as "successful non-haiku poems in haiku form," and "work perfectly well as short Western poems" (178). But Wright should not necessarily be aligned with other Western poets working in the form, even if his work has more "Western" characteristics than it does Japanese ones. As Iadonisi notes, for white poets who were interested in haiku (such as Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, etc.), haiku was often appropriated as a way to "challenge dominant aesthetic trends while controlling the threatening Asian other" - in their co-opting of the form they "[rode] rough shod" over its conventions ("Like Ray Charles is to Country" vi; "'I am Nobody': The Haiku of Richard Wright" 86).[12]

[12] Even Blyth, the source of an understanding of haiku for Wright and many other Western poets, falls into a racialized way of thinking of Japanese literary history when attempting to write about the haiku form and its cultural backgrounds. Sachi Nakachi identifies what he calls a "racist tone" in the following passage from Blyth's *Haiku*: "The Japanese, not in any case a nation of philosophers, never thought over the question of 'the pathetic fallacy.' Even nowadays, the dilemma is too intellectual, that is, too remote from ordinary, animal existence, to arouse interest" (26).

Wright, on the other hand, does not attempt to change or "appropriate" the form itself. Although, as established in Chapter 1, his grasp on the Zen-based strictures of haiku is not firm, he nevertheless tries to adhere to the understanding that he *does* have of its requirements – according to Sanehide Kodama, "it is evident that Wright followed very closely what Blyth had written about the haiku" (125).[13] In this way, he distances himself from the "imperialist appropriations" of his white contemporaries. For him,

> Any one theme may be approached from a thousand angles, with no limit to technical and stylistic freedom. But at the core of the life of a people is one theme, one historic sense of life… every short story, novel, poem, and play should carry within its lines, implied or explicit, a sense of the oppression of the Negro people… and, too, the faith and necessity to build a new world… (Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing" 43)

The haiku form, and his application of it to topics surrounding race, provides a new angle from which to consider that "new world" that he writes of, and so he adheres to it, as he understands it, in a way that Pound, Lowell, etc. do not.

Because of the similarities between *This Other World* and texts like, for example, *Black Boy*, which is autobiographical in nature, Wright's poems are often associated with the South. As he writes in "Blueprint," they are "the reflex expression of a life whose roots are imbedded deeply in Southern soil" (42). In many of his poems, however, he uses the form of haiku to gesture towards something beyond the South. For example, the spatial location is left somewhat ambiguous in many of his poems.

> a sinking red sun

[13] For more on the rues of haiku that Blyth presents and Wright appears to follow, see Kodama.

Staining a snowy village:

a cock crows softly. (342)

The undefined setting of this poem is made even more ambiguous by the word choice of "village" in the second line – more often associated with foreign countries than the "towns" of the United States, "village" could just as well refer to the French countryside that Wright frequented when composing his haiku as it could the American South.[14] The location does not matter as much as the fact of the crow and the sinking sun – aspects of nature that he might experience in either space.

The scent of an orange

By an ice-coated window

In a rocking train. (280)

Here, the ice on the window of the train brings into question whether this poem is meant to reference the warmer climate of the South; the train, a common motif in *Black Boy*, suggests the narrator's transient relationship to the landscape around him, perhaps as a traveler. Ultimately, there is an unfamiliarity with the landscape that suggests a removal from home and comfortability.

This tenement room

In which I sweat this August

Has one buzzing fly. (421)

The tenement is a location that shows up again and again in Wright's work: in *Black Boy* in Mississippi, in *Native Son* in Chicago, in biographic details from his time in France (Fabre 357).

[14] "Ailly [in North-Western France] became his refuge from the interruptions of Paris… Wright composed for long mornings in his study, then became a gentleman farmer in the afternoons" (Ward, 140).

This haiku could be referencing any of those specific locations, and by focusing on the specifics of the interior of the tenement room and neglecting any geographically orienting details, it can also invoke all of them simultaneously.

As demonstrated with these examples, the images of his poems are often unbound by national specificities. A tenement is a tenement in Mississippi, Chicago, or Paris; it does not matter where a village is located, for the "sinking red sun" is indiscriminate, "staining" all villages in the same manner. Nearly all of the poems in *This Other World*, and certainly all of those examined in this thesis, are to some degree ambiguously located. The significance of this choice of form, then, is one in which national boundaries melt away – his depictions of nature take on universal qualities just as the form in which he writes becomes an amalgamation of different nationally-located traditions. These poems represent an African American writer in France, inspired by a Japanese form and writing about the American South. Similarly, even as they have one foot firmly rooted in the South and the understanding of nature that it has instilled in Wright, they also look forward, toward "the possibility to build a new world" that he mentions in "Blueprint."

During the time in which he wrote his haiku, Wright became interested in the concept of universal humanism, and in the possibility of an understanding of humanity that he saw as being defined by the amalgamation of the "hopes and struggles of minority peoples everywhere" (Alexandre 251). In considering *The Color Curtain,* Alexandre writes,

> Imagining that the [Bandung] conference could mean the beginnings of what he called 'a de-Occidentalization of mankind' (*The Color Curtain* 203) and therefore the end of the dichotomous notion of East and West as we know it, Wright was deeply interested in dismantling racial and national hierarchy in order

> to achieve 'a universal humanism that [could] bind men together in common unity' (*The Color Curtain* 24)… Wright did not want to sit idly and wait for a culture to realize an ambition he could just as easily actualize through his creative work. (250)

By engaging with issues of international scope he finds a new angle from which to approach both nature and race. His contact with black revolutionaries in the late 1950s, particularly Frantz Fanon, "broadened his outlook on American racial problems by putting them in an international context" (Ward 124).[15] Still, questions of race on an international scale raised complicated questions for Wright. On one hand, contact with "black militants from [other] countries" gave him hope that "the voice of the black American was now being echoed throughout the other non-white continents of the world" (Fabre 308). On the other, a visit to the Gold Coast in 1953 left him feeling "great cultural shock" and a sense of "[rejection] from the inhabitants of the Gold Coast who regarded him suspiciously as an outsider" (Ward 14).

With the spatially ambiguous haiku, Wright creates images that must be considered in terms of his previous work to be understood, and which simultaneously gesture towards the complicated nature of the vision of race on a global scale and his imagining of a future in which race comes to be understood through a more international framework. He invokes his past understanding of nature – that which was identified in *Black Boy* and *This Other World* in Chapter 1 - while also, through the choice of the haiku form in particular and through the hyper-specific, unlocatable descriptions of the natural world, gesturing towards the possibility of a

[15] Fanon and Wright maintained a close friendship until Wright's death. The two "were remarkably in agreement in both their diagnosis of the disease of racism and their prescription for its cures," and Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* "strongly influenced Wright" (Ward 124).

future where race is inscribed with meaning that comes from somewhere other than the American South that is so dominant in the rest of his writing.

Wright's haiku do not represent a "genre that he could construct as race-free" as the Japanese critics argue, nor are they a simple acknowledgement of the painfully estranged relationship that his race has caused him to have with nature, as the social activist critics believe (Iadonisi, "'Like Ray Charles Is to Country': Otherness and the American Haiku" 105). As he grappled with the pain wrought upon him by a southern landscape, Wright also become interested in the nature of other places; of the city of Chicago in *Native Son*; of Indonesia and the various African and Asian countries represented at the Bandung Conference in *The Color Curtain*; in the countryside of France, where he spent time in the years leading up to his death. The collection of haiku in *This Other World* contain all of this – by doing so, they gesture towards a possibility of oneness rather than (as Iadonisi claims) serving only as "revolutionary poetry that… savagely undercuts the possibility of zen oneness" ("'Like Ray Charles Is to Country': Otherness and the American Haiku" 92). This is not oneness in the sense of a universal experience of humanity that transcends racial lines. Instead, it is a oneness that represents an amalgamation of the nature of many places, all ultimately funneling back to the nature that is defined by that "black boy part of himself," that Julia Wright's writes of (xi).

In his essay "Richard Wright's Place in American Haiku," American haiku poet Lee Gurga likens the effect of a successful haiku to James Joyce's concept of "epiphanies," which represent "an unveiling of reality… when we intuitively grasp a deeper, more essential reality hidden in things and persons" (171). Gurga also argues that part of haiku poetry's power is that, rather than using excessive figurative language, it employs literal images that can be *interpreted* figuratively. It is in this interpretation that larger conclusions might be drawn or connections to

extratextual concerns might be raised, but the haiku itself does not do this work for the reader. As such, haiku creates an intensely specific and directly accessible image which in turn demands a reading that moves *beyond* the words on the page - a reading which engages with the implications and expansions that are invoked through the use of specific imagery. For Wright, presenting simple images in poetry is a socially-charged and political move because it insists that the reader unpack the implications of the poetry and recognize the realities that are intertwined with the landscape, objects, and nature that he presents – the reader must acknowledge the "reciprocal interplay between the writer and his environment" ("Blueprint for Negro Writing" 48). It is, therefore, not a work that is escapist - it is a formidable continuation of a past tradition that also imagines the future that is to come.

Conclusion

In *Black Boy*, Wright describes an interaction with a white man in the South: "He was silent and I knew that he considered the matter closed. That was the way things were between whites and blacks in the South; many of the most important things were never openly said; they were understated and left to seep through to one" (188). In the landscape of his childhood, silence implied racial division and the social hierarchy that reached all aspects of Southern life. But silence is also present in Wright's poetry: describing his haiku, critic Sachi Nakachi writes that "the silence Wright keeps in haiku stimulates the reader's imagination" (31). In addition to implicating the reader, silence allows space in the haiku for Wright's specific extratextual concerns. Through what it does not say but encourages a reader to infer, his poetry becomes "inwardly extensive and outwardly infinite" (Alexandre 27). Ultimately, it represents what he calls the "perspective" of black writers, which is "that part of a poem, novel, or play which a writer never puts directly upon paper" ("Blueprint for Negro Writing" 45). The haiku are significant not only because of what they say but also because of their silence: because of all that surrounds them and all that they do not specifically explicate.

It also stands to reason, then, that there is a huge amount of material that can be used to read and interpret Wright's haiku – the entirety of his life's work, essentially. In my choice to primarily focus on *Black Boy* and "Blueprint for Negro Writing" as texts that help a reader understand how to approach the poetry, I hope to forefront questions of nature and race – two themes that have often been mistreated by the critical conversation surrounding the haiku. In a way, poems prune our sense of nature and make it cultural – in the act of writing these poems themselves, the nature/culture divide collapses. In their form, their silence, their specificity, their simultaneous forward- and backward-looking nature, and their expansiveness, Wright's haiku

take on the socially-charged nature that he has represented throughout his career, starting with *Black Boy* and continuing on until *This Other World*. Rather than being an anomaly, they are a consolidation, in form and content, of his understanding of what nature is and of how it implicates race and society, and they carry that definition of nature into a vision of the future. In these poems, Wright believes in the beauty of nature while also being influenced by a lifetime of experiences with all that it entails. To take such a tiny poem and position it alongside an entire body of work is much more involved a process than a casual reader of Wright's haiku might engage in, but ultimately, it is the only way to fully understand them.

There are 817 poems in *This Other World*: 797 of them were not included in this thesis. The possibilities that those haiku represent in terms of intertextual reading and a more extensive connection to the larger body of Wright's work seem nearly limitless. There is more to discuss than I could hope to cover here – to understand the full extent of Wright's haiku would be to understand his life, his every book, the complete progression of his writing and his thinking. Some intertextual readings which seem promising as avenues for greater understanding include an examination of Wright's diaries and Michel Fabre's biographical work in relation to the haiku; a closer look at Wright's ordering of the poems in *This Other World* and the thematic congruencies that this implies; the fact that the haiku were written towards the end of Wright's life and their possibility to be interpreted, as Sandy Alexandre suggests, as late work; and a more extensive analysis of the manuscript of *This Other World* and Wright's drafts of the poems. From the silence of these poems emerges the entirety of Wright's corpus – the degree to which critics, scholars, and casual readers alike are able to understand and appreciate all that Wright's haiku have to offer is entirely reliant on how deeply into that silence they are willing to penetrate.

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