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Orality in Richard Wright's short stories: playing and surviving

Laurence Cossu-Beaumont

- 1 This article offers a reading of Richard Wright's short fiction with which the famous best-selling author of *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945) both started and ended his publishing career. Indeed the last book Wright prepared just before his premature death in 1960 was *Eight Men* (1961). Contrary to the disconnection deplored by critics who underestimate this last book¹, I suggest that this collection of eight short stories can be read as a work responding to his first publication ever, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), which displayed the destinies of five characters in the deep South². How has Wright portrayed the evolution of his early immature and often failing "children" and how has he conveyed the strength and power of his later "men"?
- 2 My perspective will focus on the oral dimension of such an achievement. Little explored in Wright is the oral dimension. He is generally studied according to a political line of reading in the spirit of this quotation and analysis of Wright by African American critic Harold Cruse³: "He took his Marxism very seriously". Zora Neale Hurston or James Baldwin among his most famous critics have all insisted on the political commitment as detrimental to the aesthetics. Here I want to argue that folklore, orality and black vernacular help Wright build his narratives as much as his political ideals may have and I want to show that he was not so serious at all. In the short stories considered, orality is not only a tool of verisimilitude for his portraits of black men and women. Wright does more than write dialogues or thoughts in the black vernacular and merely offer the black orality visibility on the page. More interestingly, orality, through the vernacular tradition, has a function in the narrative. The vernacular tradition of *signifyin(g)*, as best revealed in all its power by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and his 1988 study *The Signifying Monkey*⁴ was used by Wright to subvert the aesthetic norms of black representation and to alter prejudice. Gates reminds us that this oral tradition contains a wealth of aspects: whether a parody, mockery, whether simply making fun of someone or denouncing in a more critical mode, Gates suggests that two fundamental principles lie at its core.

- 3 1. The constant play between the literal and figurative levels of interpretation. Only those who can see beyond the literal meaning are able to fully grasp the message of the person who “signifies”. This will be a first line of analysis. How is criticism conveyed through a specifically black and oral tradition of “double entendre”?
- 4 2. Gates develops a literary theory from the street tradition. To him, black writers often re-appropriate this tradition through what he calls “repetition with a difference”. Wright does use established stories, images or characters but only to rewrite them and subvert them. What’s more, this principle can foster a repetitive structure rather than a linear building within one single narrative. This pattern will also be examined in this article.
- 5 In both books, *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Eight Men*, the characters who do not die are those who *signify* on the prejudiced discourse of white society. It is my contention that the character’s success is either prefigured or allowed by his or her mastery of this African-American oral tradition which is a strategy of subversion. Orality is thus not only a central theme of African-American life as represented in *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Eight Men*, but a tenet of Wright’s aesthetics in his writing and a means of survival in white society.

1. Big Boy’s fluency: playing and surviving in white America

- 6 This first example is significant and symbolical for it appears in the opening pages of the first short story of the first book ever published by Wright: “Big Boy Leaves Home” in *Uncle Tom’s Children*. It can be deemed a “defining” moment in his writing.
- 7 The story starts with dialogues. “Big Boy” and his three mates are playing the Dirty Dozens. The Dirty Dozens is a verbal game about someone’s mother where the participants have to come up with a new line and thus “defeat” their opponent, in other words, leave him speechless. It is thus a verbal fight.

Yo MAMA dont wear no drawers ...

Clearly, the voice rose out of the woods, and died away. Like an echo another voice caught it up :

Ah seena when she pulled ‘em off ...

Another, shrill, cracking, adolescent :

N’ she washed ‘em in alcohol ...

Then a quartet of voices, blending in harmony, floated high above the tree tops :

N she hung ‘em out in the hall

Laughing easily, four black boys came out of the woods into cleared pasture. They walked lollingly in bare feet, beating tangled vines and bushes with long sticks.

“ Ah wished Ah knowed some mo lines t tha song. ”

“ Me too. ”

“ Yeah, when yu gits t where she hangs em out in the hall yuh has to stop. ”

“ Shucks, whut goes wid hall ? ”

“ Call ”

“ Fall ”

“ Wall ”

“ Quall ”

They threw themselves on the grass, laughing.

“ Big Boy ? ”

“ Huh ? ”

“ Yuh know one thing ? ”
 “ Whut ? ”
 “ Yuh sho is crazy ! ”
 “ Crazy ? ”
 “ Yeah, yuh crazys a bed-bug ! ”
 “ Crazy bout whut ? ”
 “ Man, whoever hearda quall ? ”
 “ Yuh said yuh wanted something t go wid hall, didn't yuh ? ”
 “ Yeah, but whuts a quall ? ”
 “ Nigger, a qualls a quall ”⁵.

- 8 Interestingly enough this occurrence is quoted by Geneva Smitherman, the linguist who first wrote about Black vernacular⁶ and quoted by Henry Louis Gates as well: “one of the funniest representations of the dozens [...] appears in Wright's short story, ‘ Big Boy Leaves Home ’”⁷. Yet the question is not so much about being “ funny ” -though it contradicts Cruse's final judgment about Wright's “ seriousness ”- but about how the narrative is built according to the black oral tradition.
- 9 In this extract, Big Boy is the winner of the verbal game, he masters this tradition to the point that he creates a word within its frame. This is an early indication that he can and will survive in black and white society. Indeed in the rest of the story, this early scene will be resumed in essence through a repetitive structure of episodes of fights and victories for Big Boy. This is the “ repetition with a difference ” alluded to in the introduction.
- 10 So Big Boy first wins the Dozens. In the next significant episode, he defeats his friend Bobo in a physical fight.
- “ Shucks, nigger, yuh almos broke mah neck ”
 “ “ Ahmah smart nigger, ” said Big Boy ”⁸.
- 11 Being smart here is being street smart, mastering verbal and hand fights, and surviving in that environment. Indeed, in the third major episode of the short story, the four boys, who have been swimming in a forbidden pond, encounter a white man who threatens the trespassers with a gun. After shooting two of them, he is killed by Big Boy who has confronted him and taken his rifle. Unlike Bobo, the only other survivor of the shooting, who is lynched, Big Boy also lives through the night, hidden in a hole where he has to kill a snake, and strangle a hound. At dawn, he is able to flee North.
- 12 In this short story, Wright thus moves his point of view from a boy's playful mastery of an oral tradition such as the Dozens to the conclusion that such mastery actually forecasts a vital “ smartness ”, the only surviving means for blacks in their oppressive environment. In Wright's narratives, “ surviving ” is not merely literally staying alive, for we need to embrace a figurative perspective as well: surviving is also overcoming white oppression, humiliation, and achieving revenge. A character who dies can be a winner, even more so than a character who lives. For instance, Big Boy's success is synonymous with flight and uprootedness, a sign that his proficiency has not yet reached the maturity and power later characters display. Aunt Sue, my next example, though she ultimately dies, is much more in control of her destiny.

2. Aunt Sue's *signifying* : playing and retaliating in white America

- 13 Aunt Sue, from "Bright and Morning Star", the story added to the 1940 edition of *Uncle Tom's Children*, is an old woman in the South and the mother of two Communist activists. She does not share her sons' commitment which she does not understand. She is a very religious woman and prays for her sons' sake. The elder one is already in jail for his subversive political activities. When the younger one is arrested and tortured by the sheriff's men, because of the betrayal of a man named Booker, she seeks revenge out of her motherly pain, not out of Communist faith. The story is not a political plea, but rather a demonstration of the strength of black folklore to defeat white supremacy. Indeed the way powerless Aunt Sue reaches her end is also a compelling example of how Wright builds his narrative from climax to resolution through the tradition of *signifying*. Here it is no longer the repetitive pattern but the double entendre play upon literal and figurative levels of meaning that is at stake.
- 14 When the sheriff visits her and warns her that when they do find her son, they will take him away and punish him, he tells Sue in a figurative manner :
- " Ef we hafta find im, then yuh git a sheet t put over im in the mawnin, see ? Git yuh a sheet, cause hes gonna be dead ! " ⁹.
- 15 When she learns he has actually been arrested and is being tortured and understands that Booker is responsible for this, she pretends to have taken the sheriff's words seriously. Through this strategy, namely bringing a sheet as she was supposedly told to, she is able to pay an unsuspecting visit to the sheriff and his men:
- " The niggers ma brought a sheet t cover up his body ! / Now, ain that sweet ? " ¹⁰.
- 16 Sue is actually hiding a gun under the sheet and at that point she shoots Booker. Though she is shot in return, she has accomplished her revenge.
- 17 Sue has signified on the white sheriff and his men in a double play on literal and figurative senses. She has them believe that she took their remark literally, which makes sense to them because she is a dumb old black woman. They deem her too stupid to be conspiring. She has hidden the gun under the sheet, and she turns the sheet, a supposed object of death and defeat, into an object of *signifying* and success for her mission. All this is achieved by Wright within the oral frame of *signifying* and black success is accordingly associated to black folklore rather than political, and particularly communist, commitment. This reading contradicts the often quoted criticism of *Uncle Tom's Children* by Zora Neale Hurston:
- "The reader sees the picture of the South that the communists have been passing around of late. A dismal, hopeless section ruled by brutish hatred and nothing else. Mr Wright's author's solution, is the solution of the PARTY -State responsibility for everything and individual responsibility for nothing, not even feeding one's self. And march !" ¹¹.
- 18 In "Bright and Morning Star", Wright's "author solution" is based upon the oral *signifying* strategies rather than on the political communist prescriptions. Other significant characters in *Uncle Tom's Children* encounter their death because they are unable to defeat white authority and power in such a manner: they are either too weak to implement such strategies (Man in "Down by the Riverside" is unable to take his pregnant wife to the hospital in time; his choice to anonymously kill a white man in the confusion of a flood to steal his boat leads to nothing but his own death) or too strong

and violent (Silas in “Long Black Song” launches a lonely direct attack against a group of whites who obviously end up killing him). In spite of the success of her deed, Sue remains among the “children” characters of Wright’s series for she dies and cannot save her family. In that sense, the characters from *Eight Men* display maturation in the use of folklore to defeat white racism and oppression.

3. Carl’s comedy of errors : playing and defeating white America

- 19 When Wright published the short story collection *Eight Men* in 1961, it was not well received. Black critic Saunders Redding wrote: “Wright had forgotten the tough American idiom. He had been gone from home for too long”. True, Wright had been living in Europe since 1947 but the short stories were written between 1937 and 1957. “Man of All Work” written in 1957 bears evidence to a mastery of the black *signifying* tradition. There is little colloquialism or dialect visible, but the story displays a much deeper mastery of the oral tradition than just an imitation on the page: the “repetition with a difference” technique is brought to a greater level of complexity and subversion because Wright plays on white traditions and stereotypes through this fundamentally black mode.
- 20 This story is entirely written in dialogue for it was meant to be a radio play. “Man of All Work” is the story of Carl, a young black husband and father of two, who is threatened of losing his home and the roof for his family if he does not get a job immediately. Out of other solutions, he has himself hired, disguised as a woman under his wife’s name, Lucy, as a maid in a white family. The dialogues are the opportunity for a constant play on the stereotyped sexual representations of black men and women.
- 21 In this short story the black oral tradition of *signifying* and the white theatre conventions of double entendre in dialogue, of “mistaken identity” as a drama convention through the disguise of a male character as female meet to serve both an aesthetic purpose of comic relief and a political purpose of denunciation of sexual domination and stereotypes.
- 22 Two scenes in particular are both funny and tragic. Tragic because when Mrs Fairchild who hired him asks Lucy/Carl to come into the bathroom to wash her back while she is taking a bath, it is a death situation for the black man Carl.
- “- Well, what’s the matter with you, Lucy? Why are you poking your head like that around the door? Come in. I want you to wash my back with this brush.
[...]
- Then scrub my back. Hard. Why, your arms are like rubber. Well, I never. You’re acting very strange. Do I offend you because I ask you to wash my back? Bertha always helped me with my bath...
- It’s just the first t-t-time...
- Oh, I see. Well, I don’t see why I should frighten you. I’m a woman like you are”¹².
- 23 And yet it is funny because Wright pushes it far when he has Mrs Fairchild actually expose herself to Lucy/Carl. She keeps questioning her maid about her figure, when she’s actually offering her body to a black male.
- “- Don’t you think I’m too fat?
- Ma’am, some folks are just naturally a bit heavy, you know.
- But my breasts – aren’t they much too large?

- Maybe ... a little....
 - And my thighs, aren't they too large too?"¹³
- 24 The scene goes on and the whole naked body of the white woman alone in a locked room with a black man is reviewed. Wright is actualizing all the supposed fantasies of black men for white women and thus playing on stereotypes thanks to drama traditions subverted.
- 25 In another scene, Wright also plays on white literary traditions when he has this scene typical of Little Red Riding Hood rewritten in the racial context through the "repetition with a difference" principle. Indeed little Lily, the daughter of the white family, is not as blind as adults can be because of their prejudices. She notices Lucy/Carl's strangeness and questions him. He systematically answers in the wolf manner, ending his sentences with "child".
- Lucy your arms are so big.
 - Hunh?
 - And there's so much hair on them.
 - Oh, that's nothing.
 - And you've got big muscles [...]
 - Your voice is heavy, like a man's.
 - Oh, that's from singing so much, child.
 - And you hold your cigarette in your mouth like Papa holds his, with one end dropping down.
 - Hunh? Oh that's just because my hands are busy, child
 That's just what papa said when I asked him about it."¹⁴
- 26 There is indeed a wolf among the sheep, only no one realizes it, and especially not the husband as illustrated by his answer to his daughter. This, until Mrs Faichild shoots at Lucy because of her husband's sexual interest in her; again, no need to insist on the irony. Wright has actually portrayed a white man trying to seduce a black man, a deadly situation and yet a source of comic relief not so remote from Shakespearian comedies.
- 27 When the Fairchilds thus realize Lucy is Carl, he could face death, but he skillfully manages to blackmail them: they buy his silence for the shooting and he goes home with a large sum of money with which he will pay his mortgage and keep his house. There, he cries from relief and happiness in the arms of his wife. Carl emerges as a black man who is able to support his family at all costs. He is thus the most successful character examined here: he has defeated the prejudices of his segregated and racist environment and has saved his honor and family. All this within the context of a genre where Wright subverts, in the black oral mode of *signifying*, white racial stereotypes, social conventions, and literary traditions.
- 28 Within this specific narrative and aesthetic frame, the children of Uncle Tom in their immature rebellion have grown into mature men. Indeed, other characters of this collection fail for this exact reason: they are unable to master and appropriate the tenets of black folklore. Saul in "The Man Who Killed a Shadow" becomes the murderer of a white woman -and is thus destined to a certain death- because his mind is blurred by superstitions and traditional sayings. On the other hand, Olaf only learns at the last minute that he should not have taken for granted the "Big Black Good Man" he has misunderstood: the black giant, far from the sexual predator and dangerous strangler he was supposed to be, reveals himself a careful lover for a prostitute he plans to marry and a grateful friend for Olaf who introduced them. In all cases, the play between literal

and figurative interpretation of a given situation is key to the –literal or figurative– survival of the character.

- 29 To conclude, one should bear in mind a new dimension in Wright's writing revealed by this reading of orality in his short story writing. Interestingly enough, manhood seems to necessarily mean the acceptance of a feminine side. Witness to this is Carl, whose manhood –supporting his family– is only achieved through the jeopardizing of his virility and the experience of female vulnerability to white assaults. Wright thus offers a complex representation of black men with their weaknesses, feminine side, and courage to raise a family in a world that either treats them as sexual beasts (Big Black Good Man in *Eight Men*) or as immature “boys” (Big Boy or Man in *Uncle Tom's Children*). What's more, the other triumphing hero mentioned in this article, the only adequate trickster, is Aunt Sue, a heroin. This perspective is all the more relevant as the usual critical approach to Wright stresses his fondness for brutal male characters (Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* or Cross Damon in *The Outsider*) and the supposed weakness of his portrayal of the black woman in the community. These short stories offer a necessary counterpoint to his acclaimed but unfortunately overshadowing best sellers *Native Son* and *Black Boy* for in his writing of them the artful play on literary and vernacular tradition corresponds to the actual social and historical means of survival of blacks in white American society. In merging playing and surviving Wright manages to be a black writer with much more creativity, complexity, depth and cunning than he is generally remembered as.

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---, *Eight Men*, introduction by Paul Gilroy, New York : HarperPerennial, 1996 [1961].

NOTES

1. An exception worth noting is Paul Gilroy's inspiring Introduction to the HarperPerennial Edition of *Eight Men* in 1996.
 2. The collection first included only four short stories. It was augmented on the occasion of the second printing in 1940.
 3. Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, New York : Quill, 1984 [1967], p. 182.
 4. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey, a Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
 5. Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children in Early Works*, Vol.I, ed. Arnold Rampersad, New York : Library of America, 1991, pp. 239-240.
 6. Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin' and Testifyin : The Language of Black America*, Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1977.
 7. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, op.cit., p. 99.
 8. Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children in Early Works*, op. cit., p. 245.
 9. Richard Wright, "Bright and Morning Star" in *Uncle Tom's Children in Early Works*, op. cit., p. 422.
 10. Ibid p. 436.
 11. Zora Neale Hurston, "Uncle Tom's Children", *Saturday Review of Literature*, April 2, 1938 reproduced in H.L. Gates and K.A. Appiah, *Richard Wright Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (New York : Amistad Press, 1993) pp. 3-4.
 12. Richard Wright, *Eight Men*, New York : HarperPerennial, 1996 [1961], p. 128.
 13. Ibid, p. 130.
 14. Ibid, p. 125-126.
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RÉSUMÉS

Peu de critiques ont relevé la dimension orale de l'écriture de Wright. Or dans ses nouvelles, de *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) à l'orée de sa carrière à *Eight Men* (1961) paru un an après sa disparition, l'oralité n'est pas que couleur locale. Elle a même une présence stratégique à l'instar des modes d'expression noirs américains et de leur pouvoir de subversion qu'a démontré Henry Louis Gates dans ses études sur la tradition vernaculaire du signifying. Dans ces deux collections, seuls survivent les personnages qui savent affronter ou dépasser l'oppression blanche grâce aux stratégies propres à la communauté afro américaine. L'oralité et la maîtrise du langage métaphorique ou subversif comme seul pouvoir accessible aux noirs dans l'Amérique ségrégationniste se trouve donc être au centre de ces nouvelles et au cœur de l'écriture de Wright.

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