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INDONESIAN NOTEBOOK

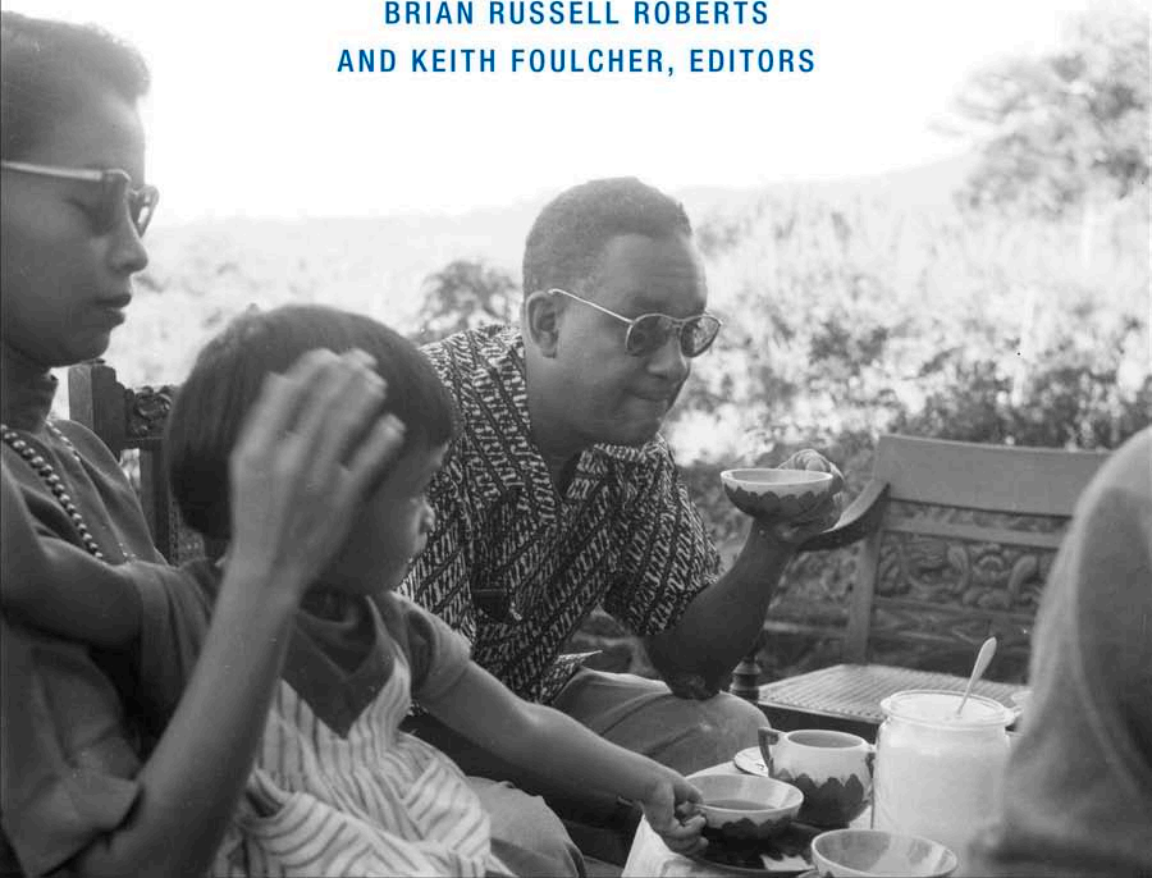
A SOURCEBOOK ON

RICHARD WRIGHT

AND THE

BANDUNG CONFERENCE

BRIAN RUSSELL ROBERTS
AND KEITH FOULCHER, EDITORS



Indonesian Notebook

Brian Russell Roberts and Keith Foulcher, editors

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Indonesian Notebook

A Sourcebook on

Richard Wright and the Bandung Conference

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RICHARD WRIGHT. "Seniman dan Masaalahnja." 1955. Supplemented with Wright's lecture notes. Translated and published as "The Artist and His Problems." Copyright © 2015 by the Estate of Richard Wright. Reprinted by permission of John Hawkins & Associates, Inc., and the Estate of Richard Wright. FIGURE 1.1. Set in the mountains between Jakarta and Bandung. Copyright © 2015 by the Estate of Richard Wright. Reprinted by permission of John Hawkins & Associates, Inc., and the Estate of Richard Wright. FIGURE 1.2. Set in the mountains between Jakarta and Bandung. Copyright © 2015 by the Estate of Richard Wright. Reprinted by permission of John Hawkins & Associates, Inc., and the Estate of Richard Wright. FIGURE 9.3. Set on the back patio of Takdir's villa. Copyright © 2015 by the Estate of Richard Wright. Reprinted by permission of John Hawkins & Associates, Inc., and the Estate of Richard Wright. FIGURE 9.4. Wright's photograph, set on the patio. Copyright © 2015 by the Estate of Richard Wright. Reprinted by permission of John Hawkins & Associates, Inc., and the Estate of Richard Wright.

COVER ART: *Photograph detail, reversed*. Wright on the patio of Takdir's villa with members of the Konfrontasi Study Club. Seated are (*right to left*): Richard Wright and Fedja and Siti Nuraini. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

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8

Gelanggang's "A Conversation with Richard Wright" (1955)

After attending the Bandung Conference, Richard Wright returned to Jakarta, where he spent the remainder of his time in Indonesia as the houseguest of the Presbyterian minister and missionary Winburn T. Thomas (Thomas, "Reminiscences" 151). At some point during this period, Wright participated in a conversation or interview for the prominent cultural affairs publication *Gelanggang*. With its masthead announcing it as a "Cahier Seni dan Sastera" (Cahier for Art and Literature), *Gelanggang* was a column for news and debates related to the modern Indonesian arts in the news magazine *Siasat*, which was aligned with the Indonesian Socialist Party (PSI). It began publication in 1948 with editors Chairil Anwar, Rivai Apin, and Asrul Sani at the helm, and in 1949 it gave its name to the cultural manifesto discussed in this book's introduction, the Gelanggang Testimony of Beliefs. By the time of Wright's visit, Asrul Sani was continuing with the column, while his wife, the poet Siti Nuraini, was working as the group's secretary. Asrul's coeditor of *Gelanggang* at this time was Soedjatmoko, a prominent political and publishing figure who had represented Indonesia in the United Nations and had helped found



FIGURE 8.1. Illustration for *Gelanggang*'s "A Conversation with Richard Wright" (1955) and later for Asrul Sani's "Richard Wright: The Artist Turned Intellectual" (1956). *Siasat* gives credit for the photograph to "Muller" (no full name provided).

the newspaper *Pedoman*. In 1955, Soedjatmoko also served with the Indonesian delegation to the Bandung Conference.[1]

Both Asrul and Soedjatmoko are credited as editors of the otherwise unsigned 15 May 1955 *Gelanggang* article "Pertjakapan dengan Richard Wright" (A Conversation with Richard Wright).[2] The article exhibits several similarities to Asrul's 1956 *Gelanggang* article "Richard Wright: Seniman jang Djadi Intelektuil" (Richard Wright: The Artist Turned Intellectual), which is included in part III: both articles use the same photograph of Wright, both discuss the genre of the *document humain*, and both refer to Wright's interest in the Bible. These similarities suggest that the most likely author of the 1955 article is Asrul Sani, although it is possible that it was authored by another figure with whom Wright spoke individually. It might also be a write-up of remarks made by Wright in a Gelanggang forum with a larger audience. Such an event, if it transpired, would perhaps correspond to the lecture that Wright, in his handwritten notes, mentions having given after the Bandung Conference for an Indonesian art group.[3]

The "Conversation" opens as the interviewer provides readers with an indication of Wright's stance on the world-historical significance of Asia's and Africa's decolonization. Notably, Wright's opinion seems to be a response to one of his own questions, as it appeared on the questionnaire he developed in preparation for his attendance at the Asian-African Conference. With the ambition of "getting to know the Asian personality," Wright's questionnaire included the query "What was the single most important event of the twentieth century?" (Wright, *Color* 445, 447).[4] As if his interviewer had asked Wright to respond to this component of his own questionnaire, the "Conversation" begins by conveying Wright's opinion that the "rise of the peoples of Asia and Africa" is "one of the most important events" of the twentieth century.

After this opening, the conversation quickly begins tracing Wright's development as a writer. Here we see a comparison between Wright's oeuvre and the 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, written by the white American author Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe's popular and widely influential novel, with its emotionally charged condemnations of slavery, added fuel to antislavery sentiment in the run-up to the US Civil War. According to legend, when Stowe met President Abraham Lincoln, he exclaimed, "So this is the little lady who made this big war?" (Sizer 49). *Gelanggang*'s comparison of Wright to Stowe—together with its vague reference to the opinion of "one essayist"—suggests that the author of the "Conversation" article was familiar with James Baldwin's 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," which famously and scathingly compares Wright's 1940 *Native Son* to Stowe's nineteenth-century novel: "Below the surface of [*Native Son*] there lies, as it seems to me, a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend it was written to destroy. Bigger [*Native Son*'s protagonist] is Uncle Tom's descendant, flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle" (100). Discussing both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Native Son* as protest novels, Baldwin concludes: "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being" (100). Whereas Baldwin's comparison between Stowe and Wright constitutes a sharp jab at Wright, *Gelanggang*'s "Conversation" seems to misunderstand Baldwin, stating that Baldwin sees in the progression from Stowe to Wright "a cause for optimism about the progress of humanity."

Further discussing Wright's development as a writer, his Indonesian interlocutor asks about Wright's ideal readers and his stance on the function of literature. Wright's answers to these questions confirm that when he had this conversation with *Gelanggang*, he was in the process of thinking through and drafting the talk he was planning on giving for a PEN Club/BMKN event that

was scheduled for 2 May at Jakarta's Cultural Affairs Center, Balai Budaja. In the *Gelanggang* conversation Wright is quoted as saying that "writers only have a 'public,' not an 'audience.' We try to reach everyone, we try to win them over, to call out to people, to touch the heart of anyone who will listen." Later in the conversation, on the topic of literature's function, he delineates his thinking further: "One function among others is the moral function. Then there's the possibility of taking part in some form of enjoyment. An active process of convincing the reader about the truth of something." Clearly, these statements indicate that Wright was working through the ideas he expressed in his 2 May lecture, shortly before his departure from Indonesia, especially as showcased in the sections of the talk titled "The writer and his audience" and "Morality and art."[5]

In further discussing Wright's development as a writer, the *Gelanggang* article turns toward the shift in subject matter that took place in Wright's writing when he published his 1953 novel *The Outsider*. According to *Gelanggang*, this shift involved moving away from preoccupations with racism and toward broader preoccupations pertaining to human existence, inspired by Wright's interest in existentialism. Whether through dialogue or narrative commentary, the conversation intersects several times with the question of existentialism. The *Gelanggang* author points out that Wright's apparent change in subject matter owes something to his associations with the writers Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. His new thematic interests are explained in the article by recourse to an allusion to Sartre's series of novels *Les Chemins de la Liberté*. The conversation's preoccupation with existentialism continues as Wright comments, toward the article's conclusion, that in his opinion Sartre—like the West in general—is so distracted by left-right politics that he has overlooked the importance of events in Asia. As an antidote for Western disregard, even among existentialist philosophers, Wright suggests that *Gelanggang* might invite Albert Camus to Indonesia with the hope that Camus would intelligently relay to the West something about the importance of Asia.

The *Gelanggang* conversation's focus on existentialist writers and philosophers, and its interest in Wright's 1953 novel, are readily understandable in terms of an existing Indonesian preoccupation with existentialism at this time. In his spirited description of the health of Indonesian literature at the end of 1954, H. B. Jassin had vigorously defended the interest Indonesian writers had shown in existentialist themes against accusations that existentialist philosophy "severed the relationship between human beings and God" and so robbed human life of its depth and meaning. He pointed to existentialism's origins in the thought of both Protestant and Roman Catholic philosophers and suggested that even the great Muslim poet Muhammad Iqbal was in essence

"an existentialist in his way of thinking" (Jassin 3:23). Acknowledging that Sartre and Heidegger represented an atheistic strand of existentialist thought, Jassin nevertheless argued that whether theistic or atheistic, existentialism spoke to a spiritually rich notion of humanity and a responsible approach to human life and behavior (3:24).

Jassin's 1954 remarks reflected an interest in the humanist implications of existentialist thought that was consistent with the evolving Indonesian aesthetic philosophy of universal humanism. This interest extended into Indonesian understandings of absurdist thinking, as can be seen in the attention given to Albert Camus during this period as an embodiment of the humanist vocation of the writer's grappling with matters of religion, ethics, and the meaning of human life. In May 1953, the literary and cultural monthly *Zenith*, edited by Jassin with occasional help from the editors of *Gelanggang* (Teeuw, *Modern* 115), published an Indonesian translation of an essay by the Dutch critic Pierre H. Dubois under the title "Buah-tangan Albert Camus" (The Literary Works of Albert Camus). Considerable effort must have gone into the translation of this philosophically dense and linguistically complex argument concerning Camus's confrontation with the human condition as he found it in his own times and circumstances. Like other reports on contemporary developments in modern European literature and culture, it was published in *Zenith* for its perceived relevance to Indonesian concerns and discussions of the day.

In the following year—and exactly one year before Wright's arrival in Indonesia—another essay in the same magazine noted the Indonesian interest in Camus and suggested it was understandable, "because Camus is a representative of a particular kind of Europe, a Europe that places importance on human dignity and freedom" (Lemaire 117). Once again, the emphasis is on the humanist connection and its universal implications. In a discussion of Camus's *L'Homme revolté*, the writer here asserts that "in the 'no' of revolt, the human being says 'yes' to the world and his fellow human beings. Here we have the assertion of the humanist ideal" (122).

This theme was pursued the following month, with an Indonesian translation of Jean-Paul Sartre's 1946 lecture "La responsabilité de l'écrivain." Here, *Zenith*'s readers considered Sartre's assertion that language "brings the person face to face with his responsibilities" ("Responsibility" 169). Sartre observes, "We held every German who did not protest against the Nazi regime responsible for that regime, and should there exist among us, or in any other nation, any form of economic or racial oppression, we hold responsible all those who do not denounce it" (165). Giving flesh to this principle, the essay explains, "The oppression of Negroes is nothing, so long as no one says,

'Negroes are oppressed.' Until then, nobody realizes it, perhaps not even the Negroes themselves; but it only needs a word for the act to take on meaning" (169). The writer "must demand plainly and above all else . . . the liberation of all oppressed people, proletarians, Jews, Negroes, colonial subjects, occupied countries, and so on" (181). Given this acquaintance with the stances of one of the most prominent existentialist philosophers, some of Wright's Indonesian interlocutors may well have seen existentialist thought as the framework Wright was using to make analogies between African American and Asian-African populations. Of course, as Wright's friend C. L. R. James later recalled, Wright felt his experiences had acquainted him with existentialist thought before he ever encountered existentialist writings. Speaking with James, Wright once pointed to a collection of volumes on a bookshelf and stated, "Look here, . . . you see those books there? They are by Kierkegaard . . . I want to tell you something. Everything that he writes in those books, I knew before I had them." In retracing this recollection, James remarked, "What he was telling me was that he was a black man in the United States and that gave him an insight into what today is the universal opinion and attitude of the modern personality." James continued: "What there was in Dick's life, what there was in the experience of a black man in the United States in the 1930s that made him understand everything that Kierkegaard had written before he had read it . . . is something that I believe has to be studied" (196).

If Wright sensed that his experiences as a black man in the US South permitted his independent arrival at the existentialist thought of Søren Kierkegaard, then his Indonesian travel journal reveals that he also believed that Asians—in, as Wright alleged, their ability to see the world of things outside of time, and to see things without looking—had arrived independently at the phenomenological thought of Edmund Husserl. He felt so strongly about this that he wanted to reread Husserl in light of what he was learning from the Asians with whom he spoke as he prepared to travel to Indonesia ("Jakarta" 80).

A Conversation with Richard Wright

from *Gelanggang*, edited by Soedjatmoko and Asrul Sani

SOURCE LANGUAGE: INDONESIAN

"One of the most important events of this century has been the rise of the peoples of Asia and Africa." Such is the conviction of Richard Wright. And it was his interest in matters arising from this opinion that brought Wright to Bandung to visit the Asia-Africa conference.[6]

Richard Wright is an American Negro writer who has gained fame in the world of modern literature with his books *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Twelve Million Black Voices*, *Native Son*, and *Black Boy*, all of which take the lives and suffering of Negro people in America as their principal theme. They give voice to a ringing protest at the treatment of the Negro race by white people, to the extent that one essayist was moved to see in them a cause for optimism about the progress of humanity. This particular observer compared Wright's books with Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and concluded that the more aggressive tone of Wright's books was an indication not that the treatment of Negroes in Stowe's time was more moderate—quite the opposite in fact—but that humanity's sensitivity to injustice is now much more developed than in the past. Much has changed since Stowe's time, but the situation is still far from satisfactory. In Wright's words, "The situation is not as bright as white people often make it out to be, but neither is it as bad as the communist press would have us believe." And with a smile bearing no trace of hatred or bitterness, he continued, "It's a hopeless situation. I say 'hopeless' because what we are facing isn't a 'Negro problem' but a 'white problem.' This is a disease we can't cure, but the fear that whites harbor in relation to Negroes will be put to rest by the Negro people themselves. In terms of race relations as they are today, it makes no sense at all for us to come together and mount an organized program of resistance. That would see us wiped out completely. But this is just a temporary problem."

I asked Wright, "If the problem is temporary, what are the issues that Negro writing will address in the future?" "Universal human issues!" came the reply. Wright's own work has been the proof of this. In March 1953, he published *The Outsider*, a very different book from his previous works. If we bear in mind that Wright has lived for many years in Paris and has no intention of returning to America—he occupies an apartment in the rue Monsieur le Prince with his family—as well as the fact that he is close to Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir (both of them are referred to as existentialist writers), then the change of style makes sense. It is still of interest, however, especially if we recognize that the feeling of "race" can be rationalized but never completely erased. Because in *The Outsider*, the issue is no longer the Negro who is not yet free of the oppression of the white race, but the Negro who has been able to rise above his situation as a member of that oppressed caste. Wright asks how this person, released from the old beliefs and superstitions that once filled his life, may become a liberated human being. Or, in the words of the title of a series of novels by Sartre, what are "the roads to freedom" (*Les Chemins de la liberté*)? The Negro of this book is no longer the Negro who passively accepts

his suffering, but one who takes an active part in determining his own fate. The question is no longer that of racial discrimination.

Even though Richard Wright has described himself as an expert in poverty, there is not much trace of poverty and bitterness in the clear lines of his face. To look at him, to note his solid build and hear his uninhibited laughter, you would think he was a writer whose past was bathed in jasmine and rosewater. It's only his books that reveal the opposite was in fact the case. Still, it is possible that his joviality serves some purpose in his life, functioning as a kind of shield against the humiliations that have been inflicted on him, just as the Spanish try to overcome the bitterness of their lives through song. It is strange, but it is also true that many peoples who suffer outward oppression appear happier than those who oppress others, or those who have the power to overcome oppression through other means.

"I write because I want to make connections with other people. That's all. There's no bitterness in me when I write my books. I only want to tell stories."

"What sort of readers do you want to reach through your writings?"

He paused for a moment. "We writers only have a 'public,' not an 'audience.' We try to reach everyone, we try to win them over, to call out to people, to touch the heart of anyone who will listen."

"What is the function of literature in this?"

"Function? One function among others is the moral function. Then there's the possibility of taking part in some form of enjoyment. An active process of convincing the reader about the truth of something."

"Mr. Wright, in one of your interviews you remarked that among the writers you like are the nineteenth-century Russian novelists, as well as Flaubert and Kafka.[7] Is there a connection between your choice of these writers and the way you see the function of literature? Or to put it more clearly, what is it that you find in these writers?"

"What I find in the nineteenth-century Russian novelists is a kind of 'sense of life,' a wonderful capacity to embody the 'experience of life in their time' in a work of art. In Flaubert we find a supreme appreciation of beauty combined with a moral sensibility. He succeeds in combining the aesthetic and the moral. In Kafka, well. . . ." He paused a moment and thought, before going on. "The simplicity of his relationship with the reader, just as though he were a child. His fundamental basis is the Jewish question. And then we also find in him a judgment on what constitutes a healthy humanity."

"Do you see in him a kind of fatalism?"

"One of the strengths of the conscious human being is his understanding of the limits imposed on him. He may suffer pain, but the consciousness of risk, of what one is doing, is the most important thing."

Richard Wright was one of the contributors to *The God That Failed*, a collection of articles by writers who had once been members of the Communist Party, but who gave up their party membership out of a sense that its aims conflicted with their humanity. The "consciousness of risk" he spoke of seems to have been an important factor behind that decision. In *The Outsider* this matter again comes to the fore. In this book he writes that being a member of the Communist Party means "negating yourself, blotting out your personal life and listening only to the voice of the Party" (Molotov once said, "I have no will of my own. My will is that of the party."). Wright's comment on this was ". . . its victim would deny its reality perhaps more vociferously than those who controlled this system of power."[8]

I asked him what it was he wanted to bring out in *The Outsider*.

"A situation that gives rise to other situations," was the reply.

"What would you regard as the most important time in your life?"

"When I was weighing up whether to stay in Chicago or go to New York." Seeing my surprise, he laughed. "Yes, it's strange," he said. "What was so important about deciding whether to stay in Chicago or go to New York? Yet for me, at that time, it was a crucial decision. It was a choice between remaining in Chicago as a post-office clerk, with all the security that position affords, or taking the risk of heading to New York and having to live by my pen. At that moment, I chose freedom."

"Who are the historical figures that you admire, or that you respect?"

"The heroes of thought, like Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche."

"You know that Stendhal was an admirer of Napoleon . . ."

"Admiring warmongers is a childish and immature trait, in my opinion."

"What books did you read as a child? What books influenced you at that time?"

"First of all was the Bible. Then came Dreiser, who gave me a feeling for realism. After that it was Conrad, because he told such a good story."

"What's your opinion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*?"

"Well. It doesn't say anything. It's nothing more than a 'document humain.'[9] For the people for whom it was written—the Negro race—it is completely meaningless. It offers them nothing. The feelings and problems of the Negro can only be written about by Negroes themselves."

"Among all the people you have met, who has made the deepest impression on you?"

"People rarely make an impression on me. I'm more affected by places and what I find in books.[10] Moreover, my education didn't go beyond elementary school. No professors ever taught me, so all the knowledge I have has come from books. That's the reason books make a deeper impression on me than people do."

"In your opinion, can the position of the Negro race in America be influenced by events outside America?"

"Definitely! I could give you lots of examples. Let's start with one close to home, the conference that's just been held in Bandung. When the first reports of this conference reached American newspapers, the *St. Louis Post* sent a cable to its correspondent in Bandung, asking him whether he thought that in these circumstances it wouldn't be better to discontinue those columns in the paper that were set aside for Negroes.[11] So even in faraway corners of the country there is an impact. Of course this conference isn't going to come up with something to solve the problem altogether. But it does have an influence."

"When did you develop an interest in the Asia-Africa question?"

"I have an interest because I'm a Negro. Don't forget that I too am a victim of the Western world. People in Europe don't see the importance of events here in Asia. For them, the big issue is the struggle between left- and right-wing groups. Even Sartre is not immune to this. They don't see the potential and the aspirations of the newly awakened nations. It would be wonderful if you here in Indonesia could one day invite someone like Albert Camus to visit. There's a great deal that he would be able to explain to the world of Western thought about events here. And I'm sure he would be extremely enthusiastic about developments here."

"Your country is very beautiful, and your people are very friendly."

I thanked him for these words of appreciation. "And what about America?" I asked.

"America?" he asked. "All I know about America is what I read in the same newspapers you probably read as well. I haven't been there for a long time, and at the moment I have no intention of going there. I love France, and I enjoy Paris. The climate in Paris is ideal for working."

Notes

1. On *Gelanggang*, see Teeuw, *Modern* 115. On Soedjatmoko, see Kahin and Barnett.

2. Other articles in *Gelanggang* during this time almost always bore the author's name along with this standard editorial acknowledgment, hence this particular article should be considered as published anonymously.

3. Wright's handwritten note, clearly scrawled in haste, indicates that his lectures, including for the art league, occurred after the conference ("Retreat"). Yet elsewhere in this book we have suggested that Wright's brief speech to the Jajasan Impresariat Indonesia, delivered before he attended the Asian-African Conference, corresponds to his

reference to the art league. Certainly, this is the moment during which we most clearly see Wright speaking at an event dedicated to the visual arts. And yet, in consideration of Wright's indication that he spoke to the art league after the conference, we are here suggesting that he might possibly have conceived of Gelanggang as an arts group. However, it is speculation to suggest that Wright gave a lecture for Gelanggang.

4. Corroborating *The Color Curtain*'s narrative, the questionnaire itself offers this as its fifty-fourth question (Wright, "Questionnaire" 5).

5. See Wright's "The Artist and His Problems," also in part II.

6. The editorial attribution to Soedjatmoko and Asrul Sani is from 1955.

7. Here, Wright's Indonesian interlocutor is likely referring to Hans de Vaal's 1953 interview with Wright, originally published in Dutch in *Litterair Paspoort*. See de Vaal 159.

8. The reference here is to Vyacheslav Molotov, a historical Soviet politician and diplomat who is discussed in *The Outsider* (248, 258). The phrase *negating . . . the Party* appears in English in the Indonesian-language "Conversation" article. For its original publication in the novel, see Wright, *Outsider* 248. The phrase *its victim . . . power* appears in English in the "Conversation" article. For its original publication in the novel, see *Outsider* 270, which has a slightly different version of the quote.

9. Here, Wright is using a catchword of French naturalism that was in common use in discussions of literature in Indonesia at this time. An example occurs in Asrul Sani's "Richard Wright: The Artist Turned Intellectual," in part III.

10. In the source text, this sentence is jumbled and incomplete, pointing to an error in typesetting. Based on context, we have pieced together the sentence's likely meaning.

11. In his travel journal, Wright noted that the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* had contacted its correspondent in Indonesia to ask whether it was time to stop using the term *Negro* in its columns ("Jakarta" 199).