

GLEND A R. CARPIO

Introduction

Richard Wright's Art and Politics

Richard Wright is best known as a hard-edged writer of political protest. Often contrasted with other major African American figures – specifically James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ralph Ellison – as more dedicated to politics than art, Wright's unflinching focus on the racial violence and class warfare that compromise American democracy has solidified his legacy as a preeminent social critic. But Wright was also a daring artist whose dazzling formal innovation was central to his politics, grounding a precocious exploration of the intersections between race, gender, class, and global imperialism. This made him at once an inviting sparring partner for contemporaries and a model for younger writers to live up to or transcend. While occasionally categorized as a “naturalist,” he used a variety of styles – from a robust modernism to a razor-sharp realism to mixed-media collaborations in photography and film; from elegiac poetry to noir-influenced experiments with pulp fiction – to call attention to the existential, ontological, and material marginalization of African Americans. As scholar Werner Sollors puts it, “the point was to use any technique that was likely to shake up readers and direct them towards serious questions . . . of class inequality and racial segregation.”¹ Wright consistently emphasized that, what used to be called “the Negro Problem” – a phrase he and Baldwin derided – was both unique to the United States and connected in a myriad of ways to power struggles worldwide, refracting the plight of people of color across nations. Wright's aesthetic experimentation and globalist point of view were intrinsically connected, making him one of the most radical writers and controversial social critics of the twentieth century.

Richard Nathaniel Wright was born in 1908 to a family of sharecroppers on a plantation located between Roxie and Natchez, Mississippi, and died fifty-two years later in Paris after almost fifteen years of what he once described as “voluntary exile.”² Named after his formerly enslaved grandfathers, Wright grew up poor in the Jim Crow South (first in Elaine, Arkansas, and Jackson, Mississippi, then in Memphis, Tennessee) and had

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limited formal schooling. But he was also an autodidact who, according to his younger brother, “seemed to live almost exclusively in a world of books and ideas.”³ He devoured “everything he could lay his hands on, textbooks belonging to his young neighbors, old almanacs, and local weekly papers.”⁴ His “first reader was the Sunday paper,” which he learned to decipher with the help of his mother, Ella Wilson. Before giving up her trade for farming, Wilson had been a schoolteacher, and she instructed Wright at home until he was approximately eight years old.⁵ Wright attended school sporadically – only at the age of thirteen was he able to complete a full year – largely because of the poverty his immediate family suffered after his father abandoned them and, later, when his mother suffered an incapacitating stroke. Sent to live with his intensely devout maternal grandmother, a Seventh Day Adventist, Wright made the best of the religious schooling she forced upon him. He “learned to decipher the system of representation set forth” in church sermons and parables, and “later borrowed some of his most beautiful images” from preachers and the “biblical mythology with which he became so familiar.”⁶ At the same time, Wright rejected the grim austerity of his grandmother’s faith, asserting, even at an early age, his individual right to create his own system of thought and belief.

At sixteen he published his first short story. At nineteen he moved to Chicago, where he worked as postal clerk and insurance salesman but continued writing in his spare time. He wrote poetry and short stories while reading widely and deeply across disciplines, especially sociology, philosophy, and psychology. He joined the Chicago John Reed Club – a local chapter of the national organization for Marxist intellectuals and artists – then the Communist Party. Although he publicly broke from the latter in his 1944 *Atlantic Monthly* essay “I Tried to Be a Communist,” the Federal Bureau of Investigation file on his activities would grow thick over time. He moved to New York in 1937 to pursue a literary career but left the United States ten years later, weary of racial discrimination and anti-Communist persecution. By the time he, his second wife, and their daughter had moved to Paris, Wright was *the* most prominent black American writer, his reputation resting on the short-story collection *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938); his nonfiction project *Twelve Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the United States* (1941), which combines a poetic, incisive account of anti-black oppression in America with photographs of contemporary black life; and above all his novel *Native Son* (1940) and his autobiography *Black Boy* (1945), which both achieved great critical and financial success. Less well-known but equally important works from this early period include Wright’s numerous journal articles for the *Daily Worker*, *The New Masses*, and other left-leaning periodicals; several important essays,

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including “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937); and two adaptations of *Native Son*, one a stage play directed by Orson Welles (1941) and the other a film with French director Pierre Chenal (1951). In exile, Wright’s prolific career continued with three major novels, *The Outsider* (1953), *Savage Holiday* (1954), and *The Long Dream* (1958), as well as four collections of travel writing and reportage.

Best known for *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, both still fixtures on high school and university syllabi, Wright produced ten works of fiction (including his unpublished and posthumously published works), one collection of haiku, three plays, several books of essays, and nonfiction works on topics including the black urban migration of the early twentieth century, African decolonization, and global communism. Interdisciplinary in practice, international in range, and interracial in thematic concern, Wright’s oeuvre is without a question a towering achievement. His fearless ability to provoke, his enormous capacity for personal, political, and artistic growth, and the sheer richness of his writing made him a favorite literary ancestor for radical black thinkers of the 1960s and the subject of intense scholarly interest for decades.⁷ But Wright is also freshly relevant for new generations of scholars, students, and cultural critics. His work speaks not only to anxieties about the meaning of racial progress in a world where – despite premature declarations of “post-blackness” – stunning racial violence erupts with deadly consistency, but also to questions of globalization and national belonging, as well as debates about the role of fiction and writing in general as methods of political intervention. Witness the publication of Ta-Nehisi Coates’s widely discussed *Between the World and Me* (2015), a book that not only takes its title from one of Wright’s poems but that also carries forward Wright’s radical critique of racial violence; or Isabel Wilkerson’s celebrated *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010), another book with a title borrowed from Wright’s verse and infused with his lyricism in its epic account of the Great Migration. More broadly, the success and reception of Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* (2016), and Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), among others, reflect a resurgence of demand for black politics through literature for which Wright’s career set the pattern.

The centennial of Wright’s birth (2008) and the fifty-year anniversary of his death (2011) occasioned conference papers and lectures in the United States, Western Europe, and across the world.⁸ The scholarship resulting from these occasions offers insight on Wright’s late and unpublished writings, on his exile from the United States, and on his work as a global intellectual and transnational humanist. It also considers his experimentation in genres not normally associated with him: drama and

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film.⁹ Our *Companion* joins this renaissance in Wright studies, while disputing persistent myths about Wright's political vision and artistry. It is divided in two sections, both of which highlight the genres and modes of Wright's craft as integral to his political project. The first focuses on Wright's development as a writer in the United States and the second turns to the works he produced as an expatriate in France and during his travels through Africa and Asia. But this two-part structure does not entail a dichotomy. Challenging a well-known argument that Wright's expatriation contributed to his supposed literary decline, each section of the *Companion* traces overlooked connections between Wright's life in America and abroad. Far from dimming, Wright's vision developed as he left the United States, exile both sharpening his political perspective and allowing him to experiment with form relatively unconstrained by the expectations placed upon writers of color in America. Yet critics insisted that his work's worth rested in its engagement with racial strife in America, largely ignoring Wright's evolving aesthetics and his often-prescient views of globalization. Since his death, this critical tendency has continued, as scholars emphasize Wright's political views, specifically his insights into the sociology and psychology of race, at the expense of exploring the full reach of his artistic achievements. By contrast, *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Wright* focuses on the inseparable connection between Wright's art and politics while offering fresh insights on his oeuvre.

Chapters in Part I, "Native Son in Jim Crow America," consider the influence of publishers on the shape of Wright's major works – for instance, the splitting of his autobiography into *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*, the latter unpublished until 1977; and the editorial abridgement of *Native Son*, published in its entirety only in 1991 – shedding new light on texts that, while classics, have not always been available in their fullest expression. Other essays explore his engagement with non-literary disciplines (psychology, sociology) and other arts (music, photography), as these dovetailed with his political development. The chapters in this section also offer new ways of seeing Wright's representation of masculinity and challenge how his involvement with the Communist Party has been understood. Chapters in Part II, "I Choose Exile": Wright Abroad," focus on Wright's leading role among black expatriate artists in Paris, as well as the development of his political worldview in the works of nonfiction that he published in the 1950s. This section pays particular attention to manuscripts in Wright's archive – unpublished letters and novels, plans for multivolume works – that illuminate the depth and expansiveness of his aesthetic and political vision.

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Categorizing Wright

As an expatriate in Paris, Wright “removed himself from purely American preoccupations,” broadening a global view of race and the human condition that, as Nicholas T. Rinehart’s chapter in this volume argues, he had begun to cultivate long before his expatriation.¹⁰ He also deepened his engagement with existential philosophy, producing a novel, *The Outsider*, which Tommie Shelby’s contribution to the *Companion* reads as a “searching dialogue with canonical works and figures in the tradition,”¹¹ including Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, and Heidegger, as well as Wright’s contemporaries in Paris: Camus, Beauvoir, and Sartre. During this time, Wright also kept his keen eye on the political and economic challenges of postwar Europe, particularly the persistence of totalitarianism. His only book about a European country, *Pagan Spain* (1956), details life under Francisco Franco’s fascist government. But Wright’s principal orientation in this phase of his career was toward liberation movements in the so-called third world. His travel books and essays, *Black Power* (1954), on the Gold Coast before its independence as Ghana; *The Color Curtain* (1956), on the Bandung Conference, the first large-scale meeting of newly independent African and Asian states; and *White Man, Listen!* (1957), a collection of essays on topics ranging from African American literature to African nationalism to the psychology of racial oppression, constitute foundational texts in what became known, after the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), as postcolonial studies.¹²

In Paris, Wright became a leading figure not only among the other black American expatriates who, following his lead, moved to France, but also the African and Caribbean writers and intellectuals who converged on the cosmopolitan capital. Writers James Baldwin, Chester Himes, William Gardner Smith, and Richard Gibson; the cartoonist Oliver Harrington; the painters Larry Potter, Beauford Delaney, Herb Gentry, and Walter Coleman; and numerous black musicians “made up a veritable black colony” in Paris during the 1950s.¹³ Key places for their “encounters, discussions, [and] confrontations” included the “Montmartre and Tournon cafes in the Latin Quarter,” the ex-GI Leroy Haynes’ soul food restaurant on the Rue Clauzel,¹⁴ and Wright’s apartment, which as Himes recalled, “occupied the entire fourth floor of the building” and was “the inner sanctum to which only selected visitors were ever invited.”¹⁵ If Wright was selective about invitations to his home, he was often generous in other ways, procuring financial support, jobs, and contacts (as he had in the United States) for younger writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, and Ralph Ellison. He was instrumental in getting James Baldwin financial support to write his

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first novel, similarly helping Himes, Gardener Smith, and others.¹⁶ Wright also collaborated with leading African and Caribbean literary figures, including Aimé Césaire, George Padmore, Alioune Diop, and Léopold Sédar Senghor. He assisted Césaire and Diop in launching *Présence Africaine*, a political and literary magazine that evolved into a publishing house, a bookstore, and key institution of the Pan-African movement for decolonization.

Wright differed ideologically with many of the writers he supported but did not see disagreement as an impediment to collaboration; rather, he valued debate as a cornerstone of artistic and intellectual progress. His position in the Pan-African movement was complicated by his rejection of Négritude, “the politically charged assertion by some Francophone African nationalists of a transhistorical, transnational black cultural unity.”¹⁷ Wright rejected such “black essentialism in favor of ‘modern’ (non-primordial) political coalitions, and, in the same vein, formed at times close relationships to the (white) intelligentsia of France,” which made some of his black peers uneasy.¹⁸ Baldwin distrusted his associations with French intellectuals, arguing that, for instance, “Sartre, de Beauvoir, and company” did not see Wright’s full humanity. “I always sensed in Richard Wright a Mississippi pickaninny, mischievous, cunning, and tough,” Baldwin wrote, “like some fantastic jewel buried in tall grass.” The French, Baldwin concluded, offered “very little” that Wright could use; it “was painful to feel that the people from his adopted country were no more capable of seeing this jewel than were the people of his native land, and were in their own way as intimidated by it.”¹⁹ Writing to Albert Murray in 1953, Ralph Ellison expressed a similar view.²⁰ Fellow artists in the black expatriate community in Paris wondered if Wright had been away from home “for too long,” if he made a mistake by cutting “himself from his roots.”²¹ His self-imposed exile, they argued, had not only alienated him personally but also corrupted, if not destroyed, “the authenticity” of his artistic vision.²²

As Ellison’s letter to Murray attests, this view of Wright’s expatriate years took shape even before his death. Though Wright’s pre-exile work was overwhelmingly well received, the books he wrote abroad received tepid if not outright negative reviews. The influential critic Irving Howe characterized Wright’s later work as “clumsy” and “uneven” and others echoed his view.²³ In the decades after his death, this account of Wright hardened, not only obfuscating his prescient critique of essentialism and diminishing his artistic accomplishments but also revealing the stubborn tendency to tether Wright’s artistic vision to his racial identity. Harold McCarthy’s 1972 essay for *American Literature* summarizes this distorted critical consensus:

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Such American novelists as Henry James, Hemingway, and Henry Miller did not discover how to cope as artists with their experience until their sense of American life had been placed in a European perspective. With Richard Wright the opposite was true. When he left for Paris . . . his best fiction had been written and exile was only to dilute his capacity for dealing with American life . . . Critics of Wright's work seem fully agreed that as a result of leaving America he lost touch with *the source of his strength as a writer, namely, his being a Negro*, a man immersed in the American Negro experience, and a spokesman for black causes (emphasis added)²⁴

In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) Paul Gilroy trenchantly critiqued this view, rightly arguing that American critics “overshadow” the “range and diversity of Wright’s work” by separating his pre- and post-exile output.²⁵ It is worth pausing over the assumptions that sustain this split, for they continue to crop up in one guise or another. According to the critical consensus that McCarthy highlights, Wright’s inspiration and talent lay in his racial identity, which, like his writing, could only remain “pure” in the United States. In his review of Wright’s posthumously published short story collection *Eight Men* (1961), Howe goes even further, identifying Wright’s expatriation with his supposedly misguided desire to experiment with form. For Howe, Wright was not “a writer of the first rank,” because, by abandoning the United States and, by extension, the “naturalist” literary style associated with his early work, Wright had abdicated his true calling as a writer of protest fiction.²⁶ Or was that “true calling” to stay black and angry? By locating the source of Wright’s talent in an “authentic” racial essence, and by tethering that talent to the protest tradition, critics have implied as much. But Wright always operated in many registers and used a variety of aesthetic forms. This was both evidence of his artistic deftness and key to his political vision. For it was *through* form – and not only through theme – that he challenged racial and class oppression, and it was by *varying* the aesthetic means through which he represented social reality that he offered new ways of imagining our world. As his talent expanded, in *both* his pre- and post-exile years, Wright amassed a richer arsenal for exposing injustice and for imagining freedom. To see Wright only as an American protest writer is to limit the scope of his formidable achievement.

Native Son in Jim Crow America

As a young man still living in Memphis, Wright was transformed by what he called the “naturalism of the modern novel,”²⁷ which he discovered through H. L. Mencken’s cultural and literary criticism. He was drawn to the style,

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especially in the novels of Theodore Dreiser, for its illustration of how “social systems drive the individual,” and determine “consciousness and psychology.”²⁸ *Uncle Tom’s Children*, *Native Son*, the novella “The Man Who Lived Underground” (a key precursor to Ellison’s *Invisible Man*), and *Black Boy* all bear marks of Wright’s encounter with naturalism. When Wright moved to Chicago, his engagement with urban sociology deepened his understanding of how social structures shape individual consciousness, an influence especially evident in *Native Son* and *Black Hope*, an unfinished novel focused on African American women workers.²⁹

As Gene Andrew Jarrett argues in his contribution to this collection, “Sincere Art and Honest Science: Richard Wright and the Chicago School of Sociology,” Wright, like Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray, saw how racial bias distorted sociological interpretations of African American life. But he nevertheless believed that literature and sociology together could provide a “multidimensional image of African American life.” He was particularly interested in the work of Horace Cayton and John St. Clair Drake, two sociologists whose years researching black life in Chicago through the Works Progress Administration program culminated in the seminal *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945). Wright admired it so much that he wrote the introduction. In his literary work, Wright combined the formal qualities of literary naturalism with the environmental and characterological insights exemplified by scholarship by Cayton and St. Clair Drake, striving to expose race- and class-based exploitation and social domination as vividly as possible. Jarrett argues that Wright “sought to balance an artistic sensibility, which could capture the nuances of human experience, with empirical acumen, which could attend to potential thematic patterns discernible within raw data.”³⁰

Wright’s combined use of sociological insight with the aesthetics of literary naturalism rhymed with his commitment to Marxist theory and Communist politics. He not only laid bare the intrinsic connection between race- and class-based oppression with gripping precision and realism, he also explicitly figured Communist characters struggling, often in solidarity across race, gender, and class barriers, to bring forth change. This brought on anti-Communist critique but also gave his prose a force that stunned readers. Irving Howe declared that the day “*Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever,” for “Wright’s novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear, and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture.”³¹ Wright wanted to “assault his readers’ sensibilities, not curry their favor or indulge their sentimentality.”³² Judging from the responses garnered by the novel in the two years after its publication, he succeeded for readers “regardless of race or region” found it a “searing

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emotional force that gripped [them] with or against their will.”³³ But others, especially Baldwin, saw Wright as sacrificing his literary talents in the name of politics. In his famous critique of *Native Son*, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Baldwin argued that the novel dispenses with the “niceties of style or characterization” in favor of abstractions like “the good of society”; that it reduces human complexity to political and sociological formulas.³⁴ Ellison and Hurston recognized Wright’s artistic talent, praising him at the level of craft, but nevertheless echoed Baldwin’s view, adding that Wright’s blind embrace of Marxism not only kept him from “discovering the forms of American Negro humanity” but also led him to depict black life in overly dire ways.³⁵

The tension between art and politics implicit in this criticism was informed by arguments particular to African American letters, as the debate between W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke during the 1920s attests.³⁶ Yet, as Nathaniel Mills argues in his contribution “Marxism, Communism, and Richard Wright’s Depression-Era Work,” the binary was also “hegemonic in the Cold War era.”³⁷ Revelations of Stalin’s crimes resulted in vast disillusionment with Communism and led to vehement rejection of viewpoints and practices associated with it. Critics aligned literary naturalism “with totalitarian tendencies and instead valued ethical ambiguity, aesthetic experimentation, and the internal complexities of individual human experience.”³⁸ It was in this critical climate that Wright’s so-called protest fiction came to be seen as wanting. But, as several chapters in this volume show, it has always been misguided to see Wright’s engagement with Marxism as separate from his aesthetic experimentation and commitment to exploring human complexity. It is also not true that Marxism left him disconnected from African American culture.³⁹ As Mills shows, Wright *adapted*, rather than merely implemented Marxist theory, providing a corrective to the racial blinders of historical materialism. Wright drew from “Marxism to depict blackness not in simple terms of deprivation or victimhood, as Ellison, Baldwin, and Hurston variously suggested, but as culturally sustained and capable of effecting revolutionary historical progress” through specifically African American “vernacular communal knowledge and traditional religious sensibilities.”⁴⁰

Mills’s chapter, like others in this volume, helps us resolve a curious contradiction in Wright scholarship. Wright has been derided both as a formulaic Marxist (early phase) *and* as an experimentalist (later years); in each case he is cast as a writer disconnected from authentic black experience. But the contradiction falls apart when we see that his Depression-era work did not doggedly adhere to Marxist philosophy, and that, instead, in the early part of his career, Wright experimented with form to challenge stereotyped

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notions of “authentic” black experience. In the latter part of his career he continued to do so, deepening his engagement with philosophy and global politics while reimagining himself as a writer; this speaks to a consistency in his work that critics have undermined. Because Wright challenged not only black essentialism but also parochial representations of race; because he insisted on what we now call the intersectionality of race, class, and gender, he has been a puzzle and a worry for critics. Rather than meet Wright’s challenge – and perhaps intimidated by it – scholars have tended to force him into preconceived frameworks, missing, as Baldwin put it, the “fantastic jewel buried in tall grass.” The writers in this *Companion* welcome the opportunity to examine that jewel from multiple perspectives.

Chapters in this volume explore a wide range of intellectual and aesthetic developments in Wright’s work that the label “protest writer” has obscured. George Hutchinson’s opening chapter, “The Literary Ecology of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*,” attends to the centrality of ecology in Wright’s “general theory of literary expression” and “social processes.”⁴¹ As Hutchinson shows, Wright was drawn to the Communist party for its vision of human unity through revolution, but he also came to see the limitations that such a vision placed on both artistic and human development. After breaking with the party, Wright put his faith in the power of literary experimentation to create a “humanist and ecological” model of self-fashioning that promoted not only human unity but also greater inter-connection among life forms.

In “Richard Wright’s Planned Incongruity: *Black Boy* as ‘Modern Living’,” Jay Garcia argues that Wright’s familiarity with literary and cultural criticism, especially his knowledge of the writings of Kenneth Burke, allowed him to produce a different kind of storytelling about the Jim Crow South, one that rendered it emblematic of, rather than peripheral to, modernity. Garcia offers a new reading of *Black Boy*, which has long been interpreted through the limited strictures of autobiography, or else contested on the grounds of its deviation from the biographical record. As Garcia shows, Wright adopted what Burke called a “perspective by incongruity” or “planned incongruity” by positing his younger self as the source of a detached critical perspective that could devise fresh, often psychological, insights into the workings of the Jim Crow social order. This was especially provocative because, at the time of the book’s publication, “black youth remained segregated and marginalized not only in fact, but also in mainstream thought, which placed them in liminal relation to conceptions of the human.” Giving his younger self “a critical function and psychological perspicacity incongruous with this role,” Wright “produced a personality . . . unlike but not altogether different from those of his