

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO RICHARD WRIGHT

Hailed as the father of black literature in the twentieth century, Richard Wright was an iconoclast, an intellectual of towering stature whose multi-disciplinary erudition rivals only that of W. E. B. Du Bois. This collection captures Wright's immense power, which has made him a beacon for writers across decades, from the civil rights era to today. Individual essays examine Wright's art as central to his intellectual life and shed new light on his classic texts *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. Other essays turn to his short fiction and nonfiction, as well as his lesser-known work in journalism and poetry, paying particular attention to manuscripts in Wright's archive – unpublished letters and novels, plans for multivolume works – that allow us to see the depth and expansiveness of his aesthetic and political vision. Exploring how Wright's expatriation to France facilitated a broadening of this vision, contributors challenge the idea that expatriation led to Wright's artistic decline.

Glenda R. Carpio is Professor of African and African American Studies and English at Harvard University. She is the author of *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (2008). She coedited *African American Literary Studies: New Texts, New Approaches, New Challenges* (2011) with Professor Werner Sollors and is currently at work on a book tentatively titled *Migrant Aesthetics*, a study of contemporary immigrant fiction.

A complete list of books in the series is at the back of this book

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47517-4 — The Cambridge Companion to Richard Wright
Edited by Glenda R. Carpio
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
RICHARD WRIGHT

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47517-4 — The Cambridge Companion to Richard Wright
Edited by Glenda R. Carpio
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
RICHARD WRIGHT

EDITED BY
GLENDA R. CARPIO
Harvard University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-47517-4 — The Cambridge Companion to Richard Wright
 Edited by Glenda R. Carpio
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
 New Delhi – 110025, India
 79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108475174
 DOI: 10.1017/9781108567510

© Cambridge University Press 2019

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2019

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Carpio, Glenda, editor.

TITLE: The Cambridge companion to Richard Wright / edited by Glenda R. Carpio.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2018061286 | ISBN 9781108475174 (alk. paper) | ISBN 9781108469234 (pbk.)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Wright, Richard, 1908–1960 – Criticism and interpretation.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC PS3545.R815 Z6127 2019 | DDC 813/.52–dc23
 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018061286>

ISBN 978-1-108-47517-4 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-46923-4 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47517-4 — The Cambridge Companion to Richard Wright
Edited by Glenda R. Carpio
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

For Werner Sollors, with love

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47517-4 — The Cambridge Companion to Richard Wright
Edited by Glenda R. Carpio
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CONTENTS

<i>List of Contributors</i>	page ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xii
<i>Chronology</i>	xiii
Introduction: Richard Wright's Art and Politics GLEND A R. CARPIO	I
PART I NATIVE SON IN JIM CROW AMERICA	
1 The Literary Ecology of <i>Native Son</i> and <i>Black Boy</i> GEORGE HUTCHINSON	23
2 Richard Wright's Planned Incongruity: <i>Black Boy</i> as "Modern Living" JAY GARCIA	39
3 Marxism, Communism, and Richard Wright's Depression-Era Work NATHANIEL F. MILLS	58
4 Rhythms of Race in Richard Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home" ROBERT B. STEPTO	74
5 Sincere Art and Honest Science: Richard Wright and the Chicago School of Sociology GENE ANDREW JARRETT	87
6 Outside Joke: Humorlessness and Masculinity in Richard Wright KATHRYN S. ROBERTS	103
	vii

CONTENTS

PART II “I CHOOSE EXILE”: WRIGHT ABROAD

7	Freedom in a Godless and Unhappy World: Wright as Outsider TOMMIE SHELBY	121
8	Richard Wright, Paris Noir, and Transatlantic Networks: A Book History Perspective LAURENCE COSSU-BEAUMONT	139
9	Expatriation in Wright’s Late Fiction ALICE MIKAL CRAVEN	152
10	Richard Wright’s Globalism NICHOLAS TRINEHART	164
11	Richard Wright’s Transnationalism and His Unwritten <i>Magnum Opus</i> STEPHAN KUHL	185
12	Tenderness in Early Richard Wright ERNEST JULIUS MITCHELL	199
	<i>Further Reading</i>	217
	<i>Index</i>	227

CONTRIBUTORS

GLEND A R. CARPIO is Professor of African and African American Studies and English at Harvard University. She is the author of *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (2008) and coedited *African American Literary Studies: New Texts, New Approaches, New Challenges* (2011) with Professor Werner Sollors. Currently at work on a book tentatively titled *Migrant Aesthetics*, a study of contemporary immigrant fiction, she has published in *American Literature*, *Critical Inquiry*, *ASAP: The Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present, Transition, and Public Books*, among other venues.

LAURENCE COSSU-BEAUMONT is Associate Professor at the University Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3 in Paris. Her work focuses on the intersection between African American studies and book history, and on intercultural exchanges between France and the United States. She has edited the forgotten text of *Gustave de Beaumont, Tocqueville's fellow traveller, in French: Marie or Slavery in the United States* (2014).

ALICE MIKAL CRAVEN is Professor of English and Comparative Literature as well as affiliated faculty in the Department of Film Studies at the American University of Paris. She is author of *Visible and Invisible Whiteness: American White Supremacy Through the Cinematic Lens* (2018). She is also coeditor of *Richard Wright: New Readings in the 21st Century* (2011) and *Richard Wright in a Post-Racial Imaginary* (2015), winner of Choice Magazine's Outstanding Academic Title for 2016.

JAY GARCIA is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at New York University. He is the author of *Psychology Comes to Harlem: Rethinking the Race Question in Mid-Twentieth Century America* (2012), which examines the work of Richard Wright, Lillian Smith, James Baldwin, and other mid-twentieth-century literary artists and critics. He teaches courses on transnationalism in African American letters, comparative approaches to the study of American literature, and modern critical practices, including the emergence of American studies and cultural studies.

GEORGE HUTCHINSON is the Newton C. Farr Professor of American Culture at Cornell University. He is the author of *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of*

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

the Color Line (2006), *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1996), and *The Ecstatic Whitman: Literary Shamanism and the Crisis of the Union* (1986). He also edited *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (2007) and coedited *Publishing Blackness: Textual Constructions of Race since 1850* (2013). His latest books are *Facing the Abyss: American Literature and Culture in the 1940s* (2018) and the *Penguin Classics* edition of *Jean Toomer's Cane* (2019).

GENE ANDREW JARRETT is Seryl Kushner Dean of the College of Arts and Science and Professor of English at New York University. He specializes in African American literary history from the eighteenth century to the present; US literary history between the Civil War and World War II; race, ethnic, and cultural studies; and theories of literature, aesthetics, and intellectual historiography. He is the author of *Representing the Race: A New Political History of African American Literature* (2011) and *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature* (2007). He is the editor of eight books that examine the long-standing negotiations of African American writers with racial representation.

STEPHAN KUHL is Assistant Professor at the Institute for English and American Studies of Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany. He has published several essays on Richard Wright, most recently “Intellectual Disposition and Bodily Knowledge: Richard Wright’s Literary Practice” (2018), and he is the author of *Crude Psychology: Richard Wright’s Literary Practice* (forthcoming). Besides African American literature and culture, his research interests include comparative literature, psychoanalysis, and relational sociology.

ERNEST JULIUS MITCHELL is a Lecturer in History and Literature at Harvard University. He is the author of “Zora Neale Hurston’s Politics” (2013) and “Black Renaissance: A Brief History of the Concept” (2010). His Ph.D. dissertation, “Zora’s Moses,” (Harvard 2018) argues that Hurston’s fifth novel, “Moses, Man of the Mountain” (1939), should be more widely read: for its literary quality as the work of a modernist author working at the height of her powers; for the historical insight it affords into the politics and culture of the interwar era; and for the bold theological implications it carries for several religions.

NATHANIEL F. MILLS is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Minnesota. His research focuses on the political commitments of twentieth-century American and African American literature, specifically literary engagements with the 1930s–1950s Communist left and with political movements of the Cold War and Civil Rights eras. He is the author of *Ragged Revolutionaries: The Lumpenproletariat and African American Marxism in Depression-Era Literature* (2017).

NICHOLAS TRINEHART is a PhD candidate in English at Harvard University. His dissertation, “Narrative Events: Slavery, Testimony, and Temporality in the Afro-Atlantic World,” provides an account of New World slave testimony challenging scholarly preoccupation with the American slave narrative tradition and its

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

attendant critical conventions. His publications include “Vernacular Soliloquy, Theatrical Gesture, and Embodied Consciousness in *The Marrow of Tradition*” (2018), “Native Sons; or, How ‘Bigger’ Was Born Again,” (2018), “The Man That Was a Thing: Reconsidering Human Commodification in Slavery” (2016), and “‘I Talk More of the French’: Creole Folklore and the Federal Writers’ Project.” (2016).

KATHRYN S. ROBERTS is Assistant Professor in the Program in American Studies at the University of Groningen. She is the author of “Writing ‘Other Spaces’: Katherine Anne Porter’s Yaddo,” (2015) and is completing *The New Monastics*, a book about how participation in creative communities such as Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony shaped twentieth-century literature. Her research focuses on twentieth- and twenty-first-century American literature and culture; African-American Literature; media studies; critical theory; feminist and queer theory; and the sociology of literature. She is currently developing a new project on podcasts as a form of civic media.

TOMMIE SHELBY is the Caldwell Titcomb Professor in the Department of African and African American Studies and the Department of Philosophy at Harvard University. He is the author of *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (2005) and *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (2016). His research and teaching interests include social and political philosophy, Africana philosophy, philosophy of law, critical philosophy of race, history of black political thought, and philosophy of social science. He is also the coeditor of *Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason* (2005) and *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (2018).

ROBERT B. STEPTO is Professor of English and African American Studies at Yale University. His research focuses on American and African American autobiography, fiction, poetry, and visual arts since 1840. His publications include *A Home Elsewhere: Reading African American Classics in the Age of Obama* (2010), *Blue As the Lake: A Personal Geography* (1998), and *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1979). His editing projects include (with Jennifer Greeson) *the Norton Critical Edition of Charles Chesnut’s Conjure Stories* (2011), (with Michael Harper) *Chant of Saints: Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship* (1979), and (with Dexter Fisher) *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction* (1990).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This edited volume would not have been possible without the steady commitment of all of its contributors and the aid of two fine young minds, Donald “Field” Brown, a PhD candidate in English at Harvard University, and Julian Lucas, associate editor at *Cabinet* and web editor at *The Point*. Field helped with every stage of production, including editing and proof-reading essays, and preparing the Chronology and Guide for Further Reading. I am forever grateful to him for his sound and good-natured approach to our work together. Julian’s precise and insightful editing brought the introduction and several essays to full fruition. Ray Ryan, senior editor of English and American Literature at Cambridge University Press, was an indefatigable supporter of this project who made sure to keep it going, especially when time was of essence. My gratitude goes to him and to the members of his office. The dedication to Werner Sollors is one way to express deep respect and gratitude for the model of scholarship that he has provided me and many contributors in this volume, and for his own excellent work on Richard Wright’s brilliant career. Finally, I would like to thank all of the students who have participated in courses I have taught on Richard Wright at Harvard University, both with Professors Sollors and with Professor Tommie Shelby, whose contribution to this volume is indispensable. As my students have made clear, reading Richard Wright is a revelation, both of the power of fiction and of the political conditions of people of color in the United States and the world. This volume hopes to reach their peers and readers in general, especially in these troubled times.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1908 Richard Nathaniel Wright is born on September 4 on a plantation in Roxie, Mississippi, located twenty miles east of Natchez, Mississippi. It was one of the most impoverished and segregated areas in the Deep South. His father, Nathan, was a sharecropper, and his mother, Ella, was a schoolteacher who started to work on a farm shortly after Richard was born.
- 1910 Richard Wright's brother, Leon Alan Wright, is born on September 24. He was the second and last child of Nathan and Ella Wright.
- 1911–1912 Ella Wright leaves the farm with her children to live with her parents in Natchez, and Nathan joins them later. Wright's maternal grandmother was a strict Seventh-Day Adventist and strong disciplinarian.
- 1913–1915 Wright sets his maternal grandparents' house on fire by accident, and the Wrights move up the river to Memphis to find better employment. Nathan works as a night porter in a hotel and Ella cooks for a white family. Nathan then leaves his family for another woman, and Ella acquires an illness that eventually disables her for the remainder of her life. Richard Wright enrolls at Howe Institute in Memphis.
- 1916 As their mother becomes more ill, Wright and his brother Leon are placed in an orphanage for a month. This experience surely influenced his posthumously published novel *Rite of Passage*. Ella eventually moves with her children to Jackson, Mississippi, for the summer to stay with Wright's grandmother. After that, they move to Elaine, Arkansas, to live with Ella's sister and brother-in-law, Maggie and Silas Hopkins.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1917–1918 Wright’s Uncle Silas is murdered by whites due to his thriving business as a saloonkeeper. The Wrights escape to West Helena, Arkansas, and ultimately move back to Jackson to live with Ella’s mother again. For the next two years, they oscillate between West Helena and Jackson, and Wright’s schooling is irregular. During this time, Wright becomes conscious of the depth of American racism and violence in the Deep South.
- 1919 Wright begins school in West Helena as his mother’s health continues to deteriorate. As her health worsens, he must leave school to make money for his family. After Ella has a paralyzing stroke, the Wrights move back to Jackson to live with Ella’s mother. Wright attends a Seventh-Day Adventist school yet rebels against the strict guidelines laid out there.
- 1921–1923 Wright attends Jim Hill School and Smith Robertson Junior High, and does well academically and socially. He works an array of jobs after school during the summer and reads pulp fiction in his spare time.
- 1924 He publishes his first short story, “The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre,” in Jackson’s *Southern Register*.
- 1925 Wright graduates from Smith Robertson as valedictorian but refuses to give the speech prepared for him by the principal. Upon graduation, he moves to Memphis and begins to take reading and writing more seriously.
- 1926 Richard is drawn to H. L. Mencken’s writing due to his courage to criticize American society and modern life. He is also attracted to American naturalists (e.g. Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis) and European realists (Henrik Ibsen, Emile Zola, and Fyodor Dostoevsky). This period intensely awakens him and confirms his desire to write.
- 1927–1928 Wright moves to Chicago and begins to work in a post office.
- 1928–1930 During these early years in Chicago, he develops a strong interest in modernist literature, such as the works of T. S. Eliot and Gustave Flaubert. After the 1928 stock market crash, he loses his job as a postal clerk and is forced to support himself and his family with low-paying jobs while living in the Chicago slums. Such an experience influenced both *Lawd Today!* and *Native*

CHRONOLOGY

- Son*. In 1930, he becomes an aide to the South Side Boys Club and works with young men in Chicago's street gangs.
- 1931 He publishes another short story, "Superstition," in a black magazine. He also starts working with the Federal Negro Theatre and becomes a writer for the Illinois Writers' Project.
- 1932–1934 Wright joins the John Reed Club, a Communist Party–sponsored literary organization. There he writes poems about revolution and is published in *Left Front*, the magazine for Midwestern John Reed Clubs. In 1933, he officially joins the Communist Party. He is eventually elected secretary of the Chicago John Reed Club and becomes coeditor of *Left Front*. He continues to read nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction, and is greatly influenced by Fyodor Dostoevsky, with whom he is often compared.
- 1935–1936 He continues publishing poetry, ventures into journalism, and expands his connections in Marxist and leftist circles. He also joins the Federal Writers' Project, where he does research on the history of blacks in Chicago, which influences *Twelve Million Black Voices*. He also tries to sell his first novel, *Lawd Today!*, but without success. Nevertheless, he publishes "Big Boy Leaves Home" in *Negro Caravan* in 1936 and begins working on *Native Son* and other short stories that will be included in *Uncle Tom's Children*.
- 1936 Wright organizes the South Side Writers' Group, which consisted of black writers and intellectuals such as Frank Marshall Davis, Horace Cayton, and Margaret Walker.
- 1937 Due to ideological differences over artistic freedom, Wright leaves Chicago's John Reed Club and moves to New York City in June. In New York, he assists in founding *New Challenge*. He also becomes a writer and editor for the Harlem Bureau of the *Daily Worker*. Moreover, he is on a rigorous schedule as he works on *Native Son*.
- 1937 He publishes his literary manifesto, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in the *Daily Worker* and publishes "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" in *American Stuff: WPA Writers' Anthology*. He also wins a \$500 first prize in *Story Magazine's* contest for his short story "Fire and Cloud."

CHRONOLOGY

- 1937 This is also the year Langston Hughes connects Wright with Ralph Ellison. They become friends as they discuss modernist literature and even attend the Second American Writers' Congress together in Carnegie Hall, where Ernest Hemingway gave the plenary address. Wright gives Ellison his first opportunity to write, requesting that he write a review for *New Challenge*'s first issue.
- 1938 *Uncle Tom's Children* is published and receives positive reviews. Wright continues to work on *Native Son*. He does research on the Robert Nixon case, in which an 18-year-old black man was accused of murdering a white woman, to help flesh out the novel more.
- 1939 Wright wins the Guggenheim Fellowship in June, and this helps him complete *Native Son*. He marries his first wife, Dhimah Meadman, in August. Ralph Ellison is the best man.
- 1940 *Native Son* is published on March 1 by *Harpers* as a Book of the Month Club selection. It sells 215,000 copies by early April and becomes a bestseller. Wright and Dhimah Meadman get divorced. Later in the year, he collaborates with Paul Green on a stage version of the novel. He also starts working on *Twelve Million Black Voices*.
- 1941 Wright marries Ellen Poplar, a Communist Party organizer, on March 12. On March 25 *Native Son* opens on Broadway. *Twelve Million Black Voices* is published by Viking Press. For his many literary accomplishments, the NAACP awards him with the Spingarn Medal. Wright begins to doubt his relationship with the Communist Party due to their de-emphasis on American racial issues.
- 1942 He officially leaves the Communist Party. His daughter Julia is born, and he publishes the short story "The Man Who Lived Underground" in *Accent*. The existentialist story details the life of a man who dwells in the city sewers after being falsely accused of a murder. This short story deeply influenced *Invisible Man*, and obvious connections can be made between the two.
- 1943–1944 Wright visits the Deep South and gives a lecture at Fisk University. Traveling back to the South inspires him to write his own autobiography. In August of 1944, he publishes

CHRONOLOGY

- “I Tried to Be a Communist” in *The Atlantic Monthly*. A young James Baldwin meets Richard Wright. Baldwin visits Wright’s apartment in Brooklyn, and they discuss his novel over a bottle of bourbon. Wright agrees to read his draft, eventually supports the novel, and recommends him for the Eugene Saxton Fellowship (which Baldwin wins in 1946).
- 1945 *Black Boy* is published in March as a Book of the Month Club selection. It is an autobiography that covers his childhood and teenage years in the South. Like *Native Son*, it becomes an instant bestseller. He does not keep the success all to himself. On top of supporting Baldwin, he helps Gwendolyn Brooks publish her first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville*, by giving a glowing review of her work when asked by Harper & Brothers. Wright and Brooks knew each other from their shared literary circle in Chicago.
- 1946–1947 The Wrights sail to France on invitation from the French government. While there, they make friends with Gertrude Stein. Upon returning to the United States, he experiences racism again and they decided to move to France permanently. He quickly adapts to the French scene and makes friends with the likes of Andre Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir. He also connects with members of the African diaspora living in Paris, such as Aimé Césaire, George Padmore, and Léopold Senghor. Wright helps Senghor, Césaire, and Alioune Diop launch *Présence Africaine*.
- 1948 Baldwin writes to him, curious to learn more as he decides whether he should follow Wright’s footsteps. Wright responds and encourages him to do so, and Baldwin moves to France in 1948. Wright continues to explore his intellectual curiosities by reading the works of Heidegger and Husserl, and forms friendships with European writers Carlo Levi, Arthur Koestler, and Ignazio Silone.
- 1949 His second daughter, Rachel, is born in January. Baldwin begins to criticize Wright’s literary aesthetic with the first of two scathing critiques of Wright’s fiction (see “Everybody’s Protest Novel” [1949] and “Many Thousands Gone” [1951]), and their relationship never recovers. Nevertheless, Wright continues to produce and begins to write the script for the film version of *Native Son*.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1949 While in Chicago filming for *Native Son*, Wright was encouraged by Ben Burns to write three articles for *Ebony*, which became “Richard Wright Explains Ideas about Movie Making” (published in January 1951); “The Shame of Chicago” (published in December 1951); and “I Choose Exile,” which was never published by *Ebony*. Burns and *Ebony* had problems with Wright’s bleak outlook on the Negro problem after World War II. They preferred he give a more optimistic story about African American success. Therefore “I Choose Exile” was never published. *Ebony* had problems with “The Shame of Chicago,” but “I Choose Exile,” an essay about why he decided to leave racist American society and flee to Paris, crossed a line. The essay still has not been published. It is held by Kent State University, with use restricted by Wright’s inheritors.
- 1950 Wright begins to work on *The Outsider* as he continues to work on the film version of *Native Son*. He also forms the Franco-American Fellowship with a group of African-American expatriates. The goal of the fellowship was to encourage better relations with France and America during the Cold War. They fought against racism back in America, and internationally.
- 1951 On June 14, 1951, up-and-coming Negro writer William Gardner Smith writes Richard Wright with questions about moving to Paris. After Wright responds graciously, encouraging him to move and offering to help him make the transition, Smith gets on the *Liberté* to join Wright and Baldwin in Paris in October of 1951. *Native Son* the film is released on June 16, 1951, with Wright starring as Bigger Thomas.
- 1953 Wright helps Chester Himes find a place to stay when he moves to Paris. He also introduces him to his friends and other important contacts in the publishing world. Maybe most importantly, to help Himes’s reputation in France, Wright writes a laudatory preface to the French translation of *Lonely Crusade*. Wright’s *The Outsider* is published in March, but the reviews are not as praiseworthy as his earlier works. In July of 1953, William Gardner Smith publishes a major profile on Richard Wright in *Ebony* entitled “Black Boy in France,” which gives the people back home a picture of

CHRONOLOGY

- a day in the life of the famed writer. Wright spends the summer in the Gold Coast, now Ghana, and records his experiences in a travel diary.
- 1954 Wright travels in Spain and publishes two books: *Black Power: A Report of Reaction in a Land of Pathos*, about his experiences in the Gold Coast; and the novel *Savage Holiday*.
- 1955 He travels to Indonesia to report on the Bandung Conference, the first large-scale meeting of newly independent African and Asian states.
- 1956 *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* is published in March. He helps to organize the first Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Paris, an important meeting of writers from across the African diaspora in which they discuss the role of literature and culture in the freedom of black people worldwide. The meeting is held in September.
- 1957 *Pagan Spain* and *White Man, Listen!* are published.
- 1958 *The Long Dream* is published. Wright works on a few other novels as well, which are not published in his lifetime.
- 1959 Wright adapts a play from Louis Sapin's *Papa Bon Dieu* and produces *Daddy Goodness* in Paris. After visiting Africa, Wright is diagnosed with amoebic dysentery and is hospitalized. In the hospital, he experiments with haiku.
- 1960 *The Long Dream* appears on Broadway, but only for one week. Wright continues to battle illnesses. On November 28, he dies of a heart attack at the Clinique Eugene Gibez. He is cremated at Père Lachaise Cemetery on December 3, along with a copy of *Black Boy*.
- 1960–1961 Richard Wright's career is universally praised in France, especially by French-speaking Africans. Many elegiac articles are written about his contribution to freedom for the world at large. And the three black novelists Wright helped move to Paris all praise him in their work following his death: Baldwin in "Alas Poor Richard" (1961); Himes in an *Ebony* article, "The Last Days of Richard Wright" (February 1961) and later in *My Life of Absurdity* (1972); and William Gardner Smith in a *Two Cities* article, "The Compensation for the Wound"

CHRONOLOGY

- (Summer 1961). *Eight Men*, a collection of short stories, is posthumously published.
- 1963 *Lawd Today!*, which was originally declined by several publishers in the 1930s, is published.
- 1968 *Negro Digest* polls the most prominent African American writers of the time, asking who the most important writer in African American literary history is. In their January issue, “A Survey: Black Writers’ Views on Literary Lions and Values,” they publish their results. Richard Wright is voted number one. The cover of that issue is subtitled “Richard Wright: ‘The Leading Lion,’” with a big picture of Wright on the cover.
- 1977 *American Hunger*, a continuation of the autobiography *Black Boy*, is published by Harper & Row.
- 1986 *Callaloo* publishes a special issue on Richard Wright, “Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance School,” dedicated to his work and aesthetics.
- 1991 The Library of America publishes a two-volume edition of Richard Wright’s work in which they restore cuts and changes made by publishers and others.
- 1994 Wright’s young adult fiction novel, *Rite of Passage*, is published by HarperCollins.
- 1995 *Rite of Passage* wins Notable 1995 Children’s Trade Books in Social Studies (National Council for Social Studies/Children’s Book Council).
- 1998 A selection of Richard Wright’s haiku is published by Arcade Publishers under the title *Haiku: This Other World*.
- 2001 On November 9, *The New York Times* publishes an article that outlines a “literary tour” of “Richard Wright’s Left Bank” experience in Paris. The tour was created by Monique Wells, who released a book, *Paris Reflections: Walks Through African-American Paris*, in 2002.
- 2005 Julia Wright, his daughter, publishes *Daughter of a Native Son* with Random House. It is a memoir about her father.

CHRONOLOGY

- 2008 Two major conferences are held to celebrate Richard Wright's centennial. On March 29, acclaimed writers Sonia Sanchez and John Wideman, along with Richard Wright biographer Hazel Rowley and his daughter Julia Wright form a panel in which they discuss the importance of his body of work. This is moderated by Professor Maryemma Graham at the Schomburg Center ("Richard Wright at 100"). On June 21, the American University of Paris hosts the International Richard Wright Centennial Conference in Paris. In the same year, Harper Perennial publishes a draft of a novel by Wright, *A Father's Law*.
- 2015 University of Missouri Press publishes some of Wright's early leftist journalism under the title *Byline, Richard Wright: Articles from the Daily Worker and New Masses*.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47517-4 — The Cambridge Companion to Richard Wright
Edited by Glenda R. Carpio
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)
