

## INTRODUCTION

*Richard Wright's Luck**Michael Nowlin*

"I feel that I'm lucky to be alive to write novels today, when the whole world is caught in the pangs of war and change," proclaimed Richard Wright in the concluding paragraph of his 1940 essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born" (*EW* 88r). Modeled on Henry James's retrospective prefaces, that essay was penned not many years but immediately after the triumphant publication of *Native Son* and was Wright's leading advertisement for himself as the latest African American writer – by far the most successful both commercially and critically – to have arrived on the American literary scene. This exuberant note is not one we readily associate with Wright, whose legend conjures up rather the stereotype of an angry, tendentious writer, for whom words were primarily weapons in the battle against the absurd Jim Crow racist regime that made life hell for African Americans, especially sensitive "black boys" like himself. This is not who we are hearing when Wright tells us that writing *Native Son* was "an exciting, enthralling, and even a romantic experience," and that "the mere writing of" the big book he was following it with, the ultimately unpublishable "Black Hope," "will be more fun and a deeper satisfaction than any praise or blame from anybody" (*EW* 88o–81).

However perverse it might seem, Wright had reason to feel "lucky" about the in many ways horrific historical moment in which he became a famous writer: what he called elsewhere "the dumb yearning to write, to tell my story"<sup>1</sup> could not but broach contexts that potentially made his story of world-historical consequence. He was a "Negro" whose whole life entailed resisting the anti-Black racism that gave the lie to American democratic pretensions and fueled the morbid fantasies underlying the United States' glittery "civilization" during a key phase of its global hegemony. He was a Communist, then a still radical ex-Communist whose experience of petty tyranny under the Communist Party USA coupled with his understanding of the perilous attractions of Nazism for the downtrodden, let alone fascism's affinities with Jim Crowism, made

him see past the simple Manichean politics established by the Cold War to the uglier will to power underlying the conflict. He was, finally, a self-styled “outsider” exiled in Paris, sympathetically witnessing the rise of variously successful resistance movements in Africa and Asia against centuries of European colonization. Wright’s lucky rise from Mississippi poverty to literary stardom in New York made for a classic American success story, capitalized on as such by his white liberal publishers (and himself) in the best-selling, truncated version of his autobiography published as *Black Boy*. But Wright increasingly came to see himself outside the terms of national mythology, as part of a global remnant of diasporic intellectuals of color, torn between Enlightenment and tribalist values, “outsiders” whose stories held the key to understanding contemporary world history and the future of human civilization. The contexts for Wright’s story – and for the many stories he would write – multiplied and widened as he developed.

At the end of Wright’s last published novel, *The Long Dream*, the airplane taking his semi-autobiographical hero “Fishbelly” Tucker from his miserable existence in an unnamed Mississippi town to prospective freedom in Paris neatly elides the more convoluted trajectory by which Wright chose exile and a literary home of sorts. Born in Natchez, Mississippi in 1908, Wright fled the Deep South for Chicago via Memphis, where he spent two formative years between 1925 and 1927. After nearly a decade in Chicago, he moved to New York City, where he lived for more than seven years before moving to Paris, where he more or less settled in 1947 until his early death in 1960. That trajectory conforms to a couple of classic patterns.

First, Wright followed the route of the millions of African Americans from the South who made the migration northward in the early decades of the twentieth century, fleeing daily indignities, peonage, and terrorism to seek opportunity in the big northern cities. His individual story, as Robert Stepto’s essay in this volume reminds us, was entwined in a collective one; and the singular *Black Boy* is most surely contextualized by the “photo-essay” that preceded it, *Twelve Million Black Voices*. Foundational to Wright’s authorial vision was his sense that the Great Migration was far more than geographical; it entailed temporal acceleration and cultural shock, a movement from feudalism to modernity that left many casualties and brought unforeseen social ills.

Second, Wright’s literary trajectory conforms to what Carl Van Doren identified in 1921 as a widespread “revolt from the village” that led culturally starved and artistically ambitious young men and women to flee the

philistinism and puritanism of small-town America for the more experimental possibilities and cultural resources of the big cities.<sup>2</sup> Chicago and New York were the destinations of most of these rebels, with Chicago ultimately proving secondary in the sense that more writers, including Wright, subsequently migrated from Chicago to New York than the other way around. It is difficult to imagine American modernism without the role played by these cities, but perhaps even more difficult without the extension of this trajectory beyond the boundaries of the United States and leading more often than not to Paris, which nurtured numerous American writers and artists on both sides of the color line. All of this empirically verifies to some extent Pascale Casanova's theory of a hierarchically organized, temporally regulated "world republic of letters" within which the most successful writers make their way toward the literary centers that determine the measures of literary modernity. Casanova suggests that no one intuitively grasps this system like successful literary outsiders: and as an American, an American from the provinces, and on top of this a "Negro" American from the provinces, Richard Wright was structurally at a kind of triple disadvantage in playing what to a friend he called "the writing game" (soon after his big win with *Native Son*).<sup>3</sup> There may be a deeper structural logic underlying his professed admiration throughout his career of Gertrude Stein, another literary outsider who made herself into a founding mother of American modernism – from Paris – and the high bourgeois Parisian Marcel Proust, who from Wright's standpoint seemed to be the literary manor born.

Wright's literary ambition, unsurprisingly, was born of voracious reading, and he remained a voracious reader all his life. An autodidact, his reading tastes were nothing if not eclectic: they encompassed pulpy horror and true crime stories; modern American realists and naturalists like Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser and their champion H. L. Mencken; experimental modernists like Stein, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce; and 1930s proletarian fiction and Dostoevsky, James, and Proust. In addition, of course, more than he tended to let on, Wright read African American literature past and present, ultimately becoming a crucial mentor to Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison (whose ostentatious erudition owed much to Wright's example). More remarkably, he made himself a disciplined student of sociology, political theory, philosophy, psychology and psychoanalysis, and later anthropology, while always staying attuned to the powerful subliterate cultural "glitter" that appealed to him as much as his decidedly nonintellectual hero Bigger Thomas, "the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American

life” (*EW* 859). His reading is not merely a major theme of *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*) but evident in his major aesthetic statements like “Blueprint for Negro Writing” and “How ‘Bigger’ was Born”; in his many interviews given throughout his career; in his still largely unpublished journals and letters; and in the allusive titles and epigraphs leavening his oeuvre from his first novel *Lawd Today!* (unpublished during his lifetime) to *The Long Dream*. Like a tradition of African American writers before him who learned to read and write in the face of prohibitive laws and racist customs, he discovered not merely that words were weapons, but more fundamentally that a literate, curious, thinking, imaginative “black boy” could be a real threat to the Jim Crow status quo. Hence the pervasive association in his work of reading with criminality, which owed much to his experience illicitly borrowing books from the Memphis public library: “I would read and wonder as only the naïve and unlettered can read and wonder, feeling that I carried a secret, criminal burden about with me each day” (*LW* 240). That “secret, criminal burden” was the inner life he would forever nurture, and it got him in as much trouble as a young boy with his Seventh Day Adventist grandmother and aunt as it did with zealous party officials when he was a budding Communist writer in Chicago. As he put it in his conclusion to the 1945 version of *Black Boy*, “It had been only through books – at best, no more than vicarious cultural transfusions – that I had managed to keep myself alive in a negatively vital way” (*LW* 878).

The writing spawned by his reading seems also to have come in good part from that guarded, even treasured, place of vital alienation. Apart from the nascent writer of *Black Boy*, which Ellison immediately recognized as Wright’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, there are no writer-figures in Wright’s fiction, unless we find one in the striking image of Fred Daniels, “the man who lived underground,” gleefully manipulating a typewriter for the first time and writing out his own name without capitals or spaces. One of the great paradoxes of Wright’s career is that he has come to typify ideological, socially engaged writing despite grounding the integrity and truthfulness of his literary vision in his radical solitude as an outsider. He joined the Communist Party, and despite his apostasy soon after the success of *Native Son*, remained a man of the Left, always more or less actively sympathetic with collectivist movements aimed at emancipating oppressed peoples. But the artist in him cherished his alienation. If reading created “a vast sense of distance between [him] and the world,” as he put it in *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*) (*LW* 242), he liked to imagine writing as the means of repairing that distance, as the building of word bridges that might link him to nebulous others, presumably

hungry readers like himself. But always from his side of the chasm, the chasm that made writing both necessary and possible. He remained to the end what he portrayed himself through *Black Boy (American Hunger)* as becoming: “a free and lonely intellectual,” as the sociologist Gunnar Myrdal called him (CC 7).

*Richard Wright in Context* aims to enhance readers' understanding and appreciation of Wright's remarkable body of work by situating it in relation to many pertinent contexts of the early and mid-twentieth-century world. It gathers new essays by an international group of thirty-five scholars spanning at least three generations. Taking its cue from something of a revived critical interest in Wright since the mid-1990s (arguably spurred on by Paul Gilroy's landmark book *The Black Atlantic*<sup>4</sup>), it should help readers of Wright see past some of the binary frames that have more often than not occluded different aspects of his achievement: Black American/expatriate; racial/universal; masculinist/feminist; political/aesthetic; realist/modernist; commercial/artistic; novelist/intellectual. As a radical journalist in the 1930s whose articles related developments in Europe and Asia to what was happening on the streets of Harlem, Wright's perspective had been international long before he went to Paris, and he arrived there already familiar with psychoanalysis and existentialism. The author too readily labeled misogynistic for his fictional portraits of women was working for years after *Native Son* on a big novel “about the status of women in modern American society” (EW 880). The “realism” that often strains credulity in Wright's fiction impresses us differently when we attend to how seamlessly blended it is with gothic romance or with modernist subjectivism and symbolism, how shaped it seems by a deeper dream logic such as Abdul JanMohamed brilliantly analyzed in *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death*.<sup>5</sup> Taken together, the essays in this book hopefully carry on the work of dismantling reductive critical commonplaces that ironically owe much to African American authors whose careers Wright helped launch: Baldwin, Ellison, and more indirectly Margaret Walker. Presumably, we are well past the time when duly appreciating Zora Neale Hurston's achievement entailed downgrading Wright's, or when marveling at the author of *Invisible Man* occurred at the expense of the author of “The Man Who Lived Underground.”

This book is organized into four parts for different kinds of contexts through which Wright's work might be understood and enriched. Part I, “Life and Career, Times and Places,” is biographical in focus, highlighting the formative importance of places to Wright's development as a writer, and touching upon the historical events and pressures and opportunities

that made these places salient from an aspiring or established writer's viewpoint. The majority of the essays then fall under either Part II, "Social and Cultural Contexts," or Part III, "Literary and Intellectual Contexts," though in the case of an author like Wright, these categories tend to overlap and can sometimes be difficult to disentangle. The principle of differentiation here is grounded rather loosely, I'm afraid, on the sense of a preexisting social and culturally inflected "world" that Wright experienced and responded to in his work, on the one hand, and the ideas, literary styles and genres, and publishing venues that determined the aesthetic and intellectual character of his work, on the other. Part IV, "Reputation and Critical Reception" covers Wright's reception during his lifetime, including notable efforts to adapt his work to the stage and screen, and his posthumous critical reputation within and without academia, including an essay on the major biographies. The book concludes with short companion essays by veteran Wright scholars Barbara Foley and Jerry Ward, both notable for their politically engaged scholarship, on the importance of Wright in our contemporary context of Black Lives Matter. Readers are encouraged to read across the different parts of the book and link essays on related aspects of Wright's career and oeuvre approached from different angles or with different emphases.

I want to conclude this introduction with a few acknowledgments. First, my thanks to Ray Ryan, the Senior Acquisitions Editor at Cambridge University Press, who encouraged me to take on this project and has been supportive at every stage of the process. I am grateful to all the contributors who have made this book the kind of book I envisioned and responded gracefully to any initial criticisms I felt compelled to make. The anonymous readers who vetted the original project offered me helpful ideas for improvement and suggestions for contributors, several of whom are on board here. Barbara Foley also generously reviewed my plan and suggested other contributors who came through. I want to thank Jan Greci at the Library of Congress for helping me locate some of the Farm Works Administration photographs Wright used for *Twelve Million Black Voices*, and Professor Toro Kiuchi for permitting us to reproduce his advertisement for the 1941 stage production of *Native Son*. Deborah Ogilvie proved a very able editorial assistant, and I am grateful for all her help. Thanks as well to Edgar Mendez for his help in facilitating the process, to Rachel Paul for copy-editing the manuscript, and to Raghavi Govindane for carefully attending to the corrected proofs. Finally, I want to offer special thanks to the emeritus scholars who generously contributed essays of their usual high quality to this book: Robert Stepto, Paula

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Rabinowitz, Jerry Ward, Alan Wald, Robert Butler, and again, Barbara Foley. Wright has been lucky to have such critics behind him, and I have been bolstered by their belief and interest in this book. They have convinced me as I hope this book convinces others that at this very trying twenty-first-century moment, Richard Wright's example and achievement matters – as an original imaginative writer, as a historical witness, and as a freedom fighter – not least because the contexts he was negotiating continue to bear an uncanny resemblance to our own.

**Notes**

1. Richard Wright, "Introduction," *Black Metropolis*, by Horace R. Cayton and St. Clair Drake (London: Jonathan Cape, 1946), xvii.
2. Carl Van Doren, "The Revolt from the Village," in *Contemporary American Novelists, 1900–1920* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 146–57.
3. See Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 9–17; Richard Wright, *Letters to Joe C. Brown*, ed. Thomas Knipp (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1968), 11.
4. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 146–86.
5. Abdul JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 26–27.

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PART I

*Life and Career, Times and Places*

## CHAPTER I

*Richard Wright's Triangulated South*  
*Formation as Prelude and Preface*

*Thadious M. Davis*

Of Richard Wright, W. E. B. Du Bois exclaimed, “Born on a plantation, living in Elaine, Arkansas, and the slums of Memphis, he knows the whole Negro race!”<sup>1</sup> Du Bois rightly surmises that Wright based his knowledge of people on place; however, his expression of indignation may deflect from the significance of his own declaration. Wright’s early trajectory through three southern states and from plantation to town marked his experience of life in the South and scarred his childhood with the hardships and deprivations of poverty and segregation. The triangulated spatial and cultural geography of Wright’s childhood is often subsumed into his native state of Mississippi. In *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, for example, Hazel Rowley joins four previous Wright biographers in rightly emphasizing Mississippi as the southern site of the brutal racial segregation and struggling impoverished family that had a powerful and debilitating impact on Wright’s childhood.<sup>2</sup> But Mississippi’s dominant position in Wright’s biography can overshadow the roles of the adjacent states, Arkansas and Tennessee, in his development. His mobile childhood through three “changing same” states, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas, left indelible marks on his psyche that ultimately not only animated his characterization of that childhood, that South, and its people, but also influenced his creative vision and ways of achieving it through his work.

Richard Nathaniel Wright’s origins were in rural Mississippi, a social and cultural geography of plantations, segregation, and poverty configured by historical conditions in that part of the Deep South. His September 4, 1908, birth on Rucker’s Plantation, located between Roxie, Mississippi, and Natchez, began a life hampered by historical circumstances. As sharecroppers, his parents Nathan Wright and Ella Wilson Wright (born in 1880 and 1883, respectively) were subject to a world order that reinforced the post-Reconstruction subordination of black people into economic slavery and social oppression.

The lives of the Wright family were governed by the 1890 Mississippi Constitution, which secured white supremacy by effectively disenfranchising blacks and empowering whites. That constitution inaugurated a two-dollar poll tax for voting and stipulated that the prospective voter show valid receipts from two previous elections and pass a literacy test by interpreting a passage from the 1890 Constitution, selected by the polling registrar. Designed to eliminate the large black population from participation in governance, the 1890 Constitution ensured that generations of black Mississippians, like the Wrights, would not only be excluded from the basic rights of political citizenship but also be subjected to a white power structure that would relegate them to lives of economic deprivation.

Dictated by both law and custom, racial segregation in the Mississippi of Wright's youth meant that a black person would be considered less than a white person. Laws under the state constitution required, for instance, that schools and prisons be segregated by race, that blacks could not bear arms, and that whites could not marry blacks or mulattos. Basically, these laws established a two-tier, Jim Crow society with the exclusion of blacks from ordinary protections under the law and from possibilities for advancement. With the enactment of the 1890 Constitution, segregation became official, along with the concomitant denial of or suppression of legal rights for black people, so that white Mississippians could recover from their dramatic losses following the Civil War and Emancipation and reclaim their former prestige by asserting political, social, and economic superiority over blacks. The southern states adjacent to Mississippi soon followed its model of legal maneuvers, so that Jim Crow reigned over the entire region at Wright's birth.

Denied opportunities for education and disenfranchised from voting, black Mississippians and their counterparts in bordering Arkansas and Tennessee lived in generational poverty. Many remained illiterate, without access to adequate schools or civic participation, until 1975 when voting restrictions were repealed two decades after the US Supreme Court ruled that they violated the rights of citizens under the US Constitution. The harsh conditions in all social, political, and economic matters adversely affected Wright's family and particularly his father, Nathan Wright, who was a sharecropper for much of his life and unable to provide adequately for his wife and sons, Richard and Leon Alan.

That backdrop determined Richard Wright's migratory childhood in desperate and often brutal circumstances. Nathan Wright moved his family from the plantation where Richard was born to nearby Natchez, where his wife Ella Wright's parents, Richard Wilson and Margaret Bolden