
Editor's Introduction

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Richard Wright (1908-1960) closes his autobiography, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, with a harrowing scene from May Day in Chicago in 1936. Having survived a brutal childhood in Mississippi marked by physical hunger and visceral fear, and a scrappy young adulthood that at one point saw this skinny youth rejected for a postal service job (in 1928) because of chronic malnourishment; he had weathered the worst of the Great Depression in the Windy City and found refuge, or so he thought, in the Communist Party and its newly formed Chicago branch of the John Reed Club, and gainful employment with the Federal Writers' Project that would finally keep body and soul, as he might have said, *apart*. But on that May Day of 1936, when he stumbled on his erstwhile Communist comrades queuing up to march to Grant Park, he was confronted by a local white ward boss who shouted "Get out of our ranks!" and who then bodily threw him out of the line. Wright's shame was compounded by the way his black comrades refused to stand up for him; by giving in to their fear they also refused to stand up for themselves, blinded as they were, he thought, "with too much oppression."¹ As they abandoned him Wright realized the folly of "such passionate hope ... so total a commitment of faith," which he never again would allow himself to feel. And in response to the stirring lyric of "The Internationale" (*Arise, you wretched of the earth ...*), he suddenly knew that

The days of my past, of my youth, were receding from me like a rolling tide, leaving me alone upon high, dry ground, leaving me with a quieter and deeper consciousness. (382)

And then once back in his room, he asked himself,

Well, what had I got out of living in the city? What had I got out of living in the South? What had I got out of living in America? I paced the floor, knowing that all I possessed were words and dim knowledge that my country had shown me no examples of how to live a human life. All my life I had been full of a hunger for a new way to live ... (383)

And he concluded his remarkable “record of childhood and youth” with a determination to write his way into a new life, and to create through this writing,

... a bridge of words between me and that world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal.

I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human. (384)

It is this self-consciously cosmopolitan Richard Wright whom we celebrate in this special issue, marking the centenary of his birth. Though a ‘native son’ of the deepest South, this ‘black boy’ from Mississippi was always on the move, always searching *for* something beyond, or being driven *from* it. Only barely remembered in his native state, at least in comparison to the other two of what is the trifecta of modern Mississippi fiction (that is, William Faulkner and Eudora Welty), perhaps this is in part because he fled the familiar? Having gained fame with a shocking urban novel set in Chicago, and then followed it with a memoir that expressly took him out of the South, in 1947 he renounced America for France, where he would live until his untimely death (and where his daughter and literary heir, Julia Wright, still lives). Along the way, Wright became a citizen of the world.

Inspired by, and in part derived from, the 2008 Natchez Literary and Cinema Celebration, that cosmopolitan exemplar of an annual public conference founded by Carolyn Vance Smith in 1990 and still flourishing today, this issue attempts to show the protean nature of Richard Wright’s genius, and in the process it demonstrates the vitality of Wright scholarship. From Lawrence Hogue’s questioning of *Native Son*, and Jerry Ward’s consideration of its theatrical adaptations; to Robert Butler’s recovering of Wright’s southern religious background in his autobiography; to Jianqing Zheng’s study of Wright’s last work, the writing of haiku poetry – we can begin to see the extraordinary range of Wright’s intellectual “hunger” and the many ways he searched for those echoes, which would sustain him. As well, these essays are *tours de force* of scholarly interpretation and analysis.

We also include an interesting photographic essay by Howard Ramsby on the changing ways that *Black Boy* was presented physically, over the span of half a century. And, thanks to Brian Dolinar, who graciously provided rare archival reports which Wright wrote while on the federal dole during his formative Chicago years, we can see (as Dolinar explains in his introduction to the Illinois Writers' Project essays) how Wright was preparing himself as a writer, and not just for *Native Son* but also for his later, "sociological" works such as *Black Power*.

We are also fortunate to have separate essays reviewing four of Wright's works that span his writing career. Each reminds us both of the necessity of grappling with Wright's complex and fraught narratives and how the texts themselves are unstable and subject to change over time.

Lastly, we are especially proud to present an adaptation of the New Orleans restaurateur and Creole chef Leah Chase's timely and warm remarks, which she gave as a public address at the NLCC conference. Not only is Mrs. Chase a living institution, and with plenty to say in this her eighty-fifth year, but it also gives just a hint of the flavor awaiting those who attend the NLCC in person. And given the historic events that happened since February 2008, in particular those involving another skinny cosmopolitan (and clearly *searching*) young black man out of Chicago, who will be inaugurated as the forty-fourth president of the United States by the time this special issue is actually out, it is interesting to consider what someone like Mrs. Chase, who came of age in the years Richard Wright wrote about in his first books, means when she asks, "what are you going to change?"

If it was Mississippi, or rather if it was *surviving* the Mississippi of the early twentieth century which gave Wright his need for a "passionate hope," it was Chicago which disabused him of it and pushed him ever outward, first to New York, then to Paris and the four corners of the earth. In closing, here is perhaps the best evocation of that Chicago which first took Richard Wright in and then spat him out, ready to write his world anew, by the poet Carl Sandburg (1878-1967), "Chicago," from his own first published book of poems (1916):

Chicago

Hog Butcher for the World,
 Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
 Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;
 Stormy, husky, brawling,
 City of the Big Shoulders:

They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen
 your painted women under the gas lamps luring the farm
 boys.

And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true I have
 seen the gunman kill and go free to kill again.

And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the faces of
 women and children I have seen the marks of wanton hunger.

And having answered so I turn once more to those who sneer at this
 my city, and I give them back the sneer and say to them:
 Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud
 to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning.

Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on job, here is
 a tall bold slugger set vivid against the little soft cities;
 Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage
 pitted against the wilderness,
 Bareheaded,
 Shoveling,
 Wrecking,
 Planning,
 Building, breaking, rebuilding,

Under the smoke, dust all over his mouth, laughing with white
 teeth,
 Under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a young man
 laughs,
 Laughing even as an ignorant fighter laughs who has never lost a
 battle,
 Bragging and laughing that under his wrist is the pulse, and under
 his ribs the heart of the people,
 Laughing!

Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth, half-
 naked, sweating, proud to be Hog Butcher, Tool Maker,
 Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight Handler
 to the Nation.²

NOTES

¹ Quotations are from *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth*, The Restored Text Established by the Library of America (New York: Harper-Perennial, 2006). Quotations are from pp.380, 381, respectively.

² *Chicago Poems* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1916), pp.1-2. Used with permission.