

Richard Wright's Truths

By William E. Dow

The objective of this essay is to profile Richard Wright and his literary legacy through an emphasis on his most important thoughts and writings on racism, fascism, and anti-Semitism. It must be noted that Wright's entire lifespan falls under the Jim Crow era (roughly 1890-1960), America's fall into anti-black racism, pervasive racial segregation, and unwritten codes of behavior presiding over interactions between Black and whites¹. In practice, the Jim Crow Laws mandated segregation of schools, libraries, parks, drinking fountains, restaurants, and all public facilities in the South, beginning in the 1870s. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 hastened the end of legal Jim Crow.

Equally important, all of Wright's fictional and non-fictional writings are set in that part of the twentieth century when Jim Crow laws and practices were largely omnipresent and unabating. Even though it rarely comes out in studies about Wright's work, "Jewishness does [...] seem to recur throughout his fictional and nonfictional works," as Josef M. Armengol remarks, "with black-Jewish relations featuring prominently in both."² In effect, his entire canon is full of references to Jewishness, "the specter of fascism, racial terror, [and] unchecked capitalist accumulation..."³ recurring from his early novel *Native Son* (1940) to his semi-autobiographical *Black Boy* (1945) and extending to his late travel book *Pagan Spain* (1957), the (book-length) *The Man Who Lived Underground* (2021), and beyond. My discussion of Wright's propositional thinking and conceptions of Black-Jewish relations will focus mostly on *Native Son* and *Black Boy*.

Indeed, the argument for Richard Wright (1908–60) as one of the most influential American novelists of the twentieth century—an intractable "signifier for race"⁴ and penetrating commentator on European and U.S. brands of fascism—largely rests on his essayistic and naturalistic novel *Native Son* and his fictionalized autobiography, *Black Boy*.

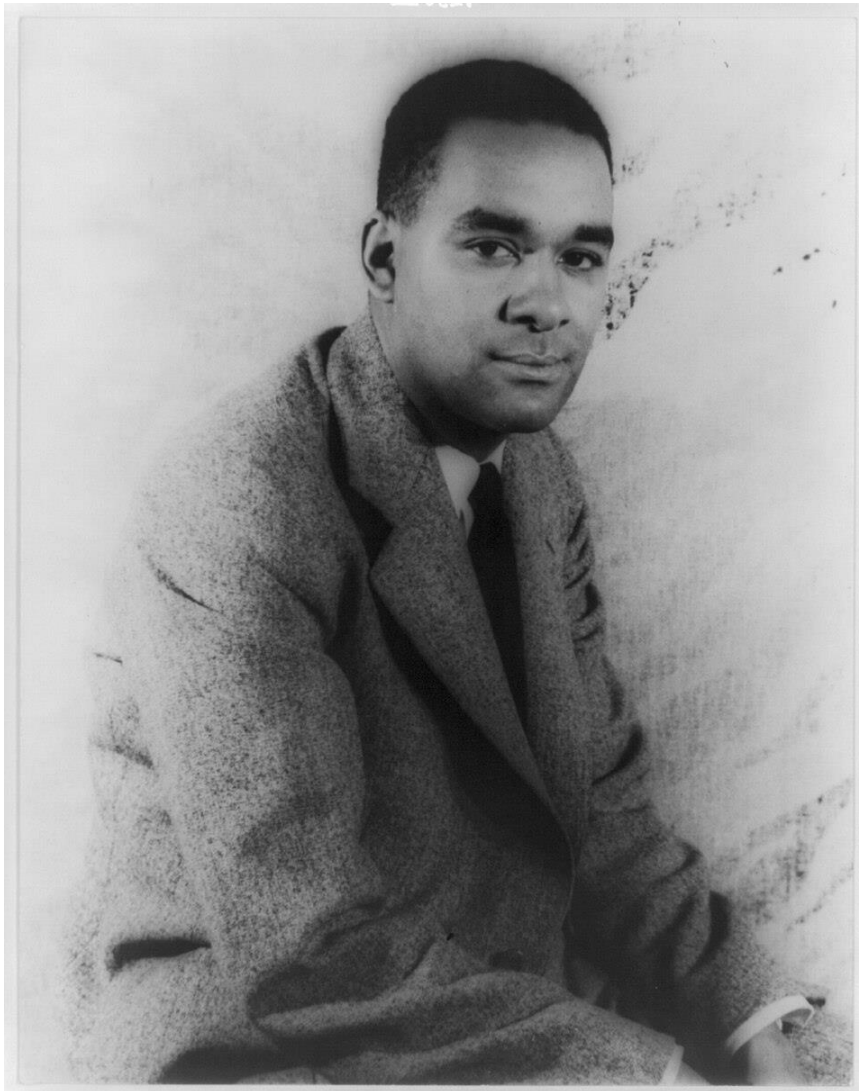
¹ See Mehrvand, 219-220.

² Armengol, 550.

³ Mutnick, 1.

⁴ Rowley, "Framing," 63.

Wright's trademarks as an urban naturalist and modernist⁵ tracing chronic hunger, racial conflict, social disempowerment, family dysfunction, and educational disadvantage pervade these two works. His quest throughout is to understand “the framework of contemporary living”—particularly concerning race—and “for theories to light up the shadows of conduct.”⁶ Charting a new and disturbing trajectory of race relations in America, Wright created both an autobiographical self and a male African American subjectivity in *Black Boy* and *Native Son*.



Richard Wright by Carl Van Vechten, unknown date – Van Vechten Collection, Library of Congress
via Wikimedia Commons.

⁵ To be understood in the commonly accepted Anglo-American definitions of « naturalism » and « modernism » rather than an evocation of Émile Zola's naturalism or literary modernism.

⁶ Wright, *Black Boy*, 284. Henceforth BB.

The Origins of an Autobiographical Prose Devoted to Narrating African American Experiences

In both works, Wright highlights the importance of social science that, as Christopher Douglass argues, “had revolutionized his thinking, a body of science that challenged the reigning American paradigm of race by focusing on learned culture and lived environment. It replaced the dominant view of group-based identity as race with a truer view of group-based identity determined by culture and environment: a paradigm of culture as not immutable, genetically inherited, natural, and hierarchical, but rather as malleable, learned, conventionally arbitrary, and relative.”⁷ Congruently, in “How Bigger Was Born” (1940), an explanatory essay added to “the author’s edition” of the novel in May 1940, Wright makes constant references to German anti-Semitism, and its analogy to white racism against blacks. In this essay, he insists that the sense of powerlessness of the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, made him a perfect candidate for embracing totalitarian ideologies, including Nazism and Communism. “I was fascinated,” wrote Wright, “by the similarity of the emotional tensions of Bigger in America and Bigger in Nazi Germany and Bigger in old Russia.”⁸

In essence, Wright compares the conditions of Chicago with the conditions that gave rise to European fascism, and he underscores the connections between the psychological disorder wrought by racism and the burgeoning struggles for racial equality:

All Bigger Thomases, white and black, felt tense, afraid, nervous, hysterical, and restless. From far away Nazi Germany and old Russia had come to me items of knowledge that told me that certain modern experiences were creating types of personalities whose existence ignored racial and national lines of demarcation, that those personalities carried with them a more universal dram-element than anything I’d ever encountered before...⁹

For Wright, the leanings of Blacks towards fascism and totalitarianism is a direct result of living in a country where they cannot “forget their color and play a responsible role of the vital processes of the nation’s life.”¹⁰ More specifically, Wright’s understanding of German Fascism significantly contributed to creating the predilections and psychology of his character, Bigger Thomas:

⁷ Douglass, 186-187.

⁸ Wright, “How,” 446. Henceforth “How.”

⁹ Wright, “How,” 446.

¹⁰ Wright, “How,” 440.

And on innumerable occasions I was startled to detect, either from the from the side of the Fascists or from the side of the oppressed, reactions, moods, phrases, attitudes that reminded me strongly of Bigger, that helped to bring out more clearly the shadowy outline of the negative that lay in the back of my mind.¹¹

Wright's early manifesto, the Marxist-inflected "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937), can be considered as the blueprint of literary composition that he himself applied throughout his career as well as a declaration on race and a call for Black expression that would counter the confines of a brewing European fascism and U.S. white supremacism. It outlines what Wright considered to be African American literature's lack of independence and verve: "Negro writing in the past had been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a begging to white America . . . dressed in the knee pants of servility."

¹² A result of his acute intellectual and social vision based on the racism and poverty that he experienced in the American South, it calls for "[an] emphasis upon tendency and experiment, a view of society as something becoming rather than as something fixed" (Blueprint, 1404). Attempting to strike a balance between representing in fictional forms "a theory about the meaning, structure and direction of modern society" (Blueprint, 1408) and preserving an artistic sense untainted by didacticism, Wright forecasts the kind of "global perspective" that will pervade his entire canon: "Perspective for Negro writers will come when they have looked and brooded so hard and long upon the harsh lot of their race and compared it with the hopes and struggles of minority peoples everywhere that the cold facts have begun to tell them something" (Blueprint, 1408).

Struggling with his own conflicted American identity, Wright offered his experiences as a template for contemporary racial history but had to go far beyond America to do so. He was able to move himself into the "sphere of conscious history,"¹³ but only by positioning himself alongside the twenty-seven nations meeting together at the 1955 Bandung conference in Jakarta, Indonesia. As he writes in *The Color Curtain* (1956):

I feel that my life has given me some keys to what they would say or do. I'm an American Negro. I've had the burden of race consciousness.¹⁴

¹¹ Wright, "How," 440.

¹² Wright, "Blueprint," 1403. Hereafter Blueprint.

¹³ Wright, *Voices*, 147. Hereafter Voices.

¹⁴ Wright, *Color Curtain*, 440-441.

Wright had to journey outside himself and his American environments (Jackson, Mississippi; Memphis, Chicago, New York, before setting up in Paris), in order to maintain a connection with his racial and cultural roots. Wright, as Kenneth Kinnamon has argued, “is a phenomenon not easy to explain.”¹⁵



“Black American author Richard Wright lived in this building from 1948 to 1958”, Plaque on the building of 14 rue Monsieur Le Prince, Paris 6th arrondissement, here in 2010 – Mu via Wikimedia Commons.

And yet so much of Wright’s fiction makes use of a clarifying narrator, a persona of Wright, or a protagonist feeling obliged to explain or justify himself/herself to others, be those others readers or other characters or some imagined or real community. As we shall see in reference to *Native Son*, Wright often presents his views on race, fascism, and anti-Semitism through his clarifying narrator. “If I become polemic,” Wright stated in a 1960 interview, “it is because I am trying to tell the reader something and I am afraid he does not understand.”¹⁶ In such works as *Black Boy*, *Lawd Today!* (written in 1934–5 but not published until 1963), *Savage*

¹⁵ Kenneth Kinnamon 1972, *The Emergence of Richard Wright: A Study in Literature and Society*, Urbana, Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press, 3.

¹⁶ *Conversations*, 240. Hereafter *Conversations*.

Holiday (1954), *The Long Dream* (1958), and *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941), there seems to be the assumption that this other will not be able to understand without such explanations – or, in one of Wright’s favorite terms, without “revelation.” Wright, in his words, insisted that “fiction and writing in general” was always “a means of revealing the truth of life and experience,” and thus “literature ought to be a sharp instrument to reveal something important about mankind, about living, about life whether among whites or blacks.”¹⁷ By creating a social consciousness that would elucidate a collective sense of black life in America, Wright’s autobiographical prose attempted to depart boldly from all previous forms of African American writing. Through this prose, Wright not only portrayed “his liberal-radicalness, his blackness, his maleness, his Americanness”¹⁸ but a new global perspective, which invariably included a look backward at the injustices, hunger, and despair of his earlier life.

Uncle Tom’s Children: Racial Issues and Marxism

Wright’s first literary publication was not a novel but a collection of four short stories entitled *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), for which he was awarded the Federal Writers’ Project Story Magazine Prize for best work. By the time *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938) appeared, Wright had been a member of the Communist Party for four years, had developed friendships with many of the proletarian writers and socially engaged intellectuals of the time – among them, Nelson Algren, Jack Conroy, Arna Bontemps, and James T. Farrell – and between 1934 and 1937 had widely published stories, poems, reviews, and journalism in *Left Front*, *Anvil*, and *New Masses*.¹⁹

The 1938 edition of *Uncle Tom’s Children* contained only four stories: “Big Boy Leaves Home,” “Down by the Riverside,” “Long Black Song,” and “Fire and Cloud.” When it was reissued by Harper in 1940, the autobiographical preface, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” and another story, “Bright and Morning Star,” were added. Wright wrote all six pieces in Chicago, where he was an active member of the Communist Party and a leader in the new South Side Writers’ Group. As if executing the tenets of “Blueprint,” *Uncle Tom’s Children*, as its title suggests, responds to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s sentimental abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), and in particular to “Uncle Tom” stereotypes (presenting blacks as

¹⁷ Hakutani, 117.

¹⁸ Moore, 365.

¹⁹ Tuttleton, 263.

ignorant, docile, or devilish) and Stowe's racial theories. As the children of Uncle Tom, each of the characters in the collection reacts against the brutalization of whites – not ideologically but instinctively and intuitively – in striving for a more dignified life.

Collectively the stories illustrate Wright's Marxist positions in "Blueprint" by reflecting the need for a black working-class consciousness ("Bright and Morning Star"), interracial solidarity ("Down by the Riverside"), and the social realities of inevitable violence engendered by a system dependent on economic inequity and racial inequality ("Long Black Song"). Following the general pattern of proletarian fiction, Wright organized the stories in a sequence in which the black characters are first victimized but – as brought out in the last stories, "Fire and Cloud" and "Bright Morning Star" – eventually oppose the "white world" with potentially revolutionary action. And yet, as Robert Shulman has noted, the central character in "Fire and Cloud," the Reverend Taylor, interprets the social conflict of the community (the black community is hungry; the white relief officers are refusing to help) not as a contest "between owners and workers, as in the communist, Popular Front tradition, but between white owners and oppressed black people."²⁰ By foregrounding race and illustrating the importance of "the Negro church" to African-American culture, Wright fuses Christianity and Marxist ideology with democratic process to create another kind of liberation theology. In the process, he holds to a principal conviction in "Blueprint": "If the sensory vehicle of imaginative writing is required to carry too great a load of didactic material, the artistic sense is submerged" (Blueprint, 1409). Nevertheless, as Nicole Waligora-Davis has observed, "Communism and interracial cooperation emerge in this collection as partial solutions to poverty and racial discrimination."²¹ Congruently, the stories in *Uncle Tom's Children* not only recreate the setting and atmosphere of Wright's childhood but are filled with the kinds of racial protest, literary naturalism, and some of Wright's problematic portrayals of women that prefigure *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. Like these latter works, *Uncle Tom's Children* "function[s] as a composite of American race relations, relations whose boundaries and racial codes are so absolute that by Wright's accounting any single misstep by a black American will likely produce lethal consequences."²²

Reactions to the collection were varied. Leftist publications such as *Partisan Review*, *Daily Worker*, and *New Masses* gave it favorable to ambivalent reviews.²³ Leading critics and

²⁰ Shulman, 236.

²¹ Waligora-Davis, 320.

²² Waligora-Davis, 319.

²³ Joyce, URL: <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?&id=GALE>

writers of the time, including Alain Locke , Malcolm Cowley , James T. Farrell , Countee Cullen, and Sterling Brown , saw it as a major literary achievement that realistically described the sufferings and demands of southern blacks and how Jim Crow had assailed black dignity. One of the most enduring and negative reviews of *Uncle Tom's Children* was that of the African-American writer Zora Neale Hurston (*Saturday Review of Literature*, 1938), who criticized Wright's use of dialect, his portrayal of female characters, his Marxism, and his failing to account for the "sympathy and understanding" of black culture.²⁴ Perhaps the harshest critic of the collection, though, was Wright himself, who wrote in 1940 that he "had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about." Wright "swore" to learn from this "naive mistake" and promised himself that if he "ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears."²⁵



"Colored Waiting Room" at a bus stop in Durham, North Carolina, May 1940, in accordance with Jim Crow laws – Library of Congress via Wikimedia Commons.

²⁴ Hurston, 32.

²⁵ Wright, "How," 454.

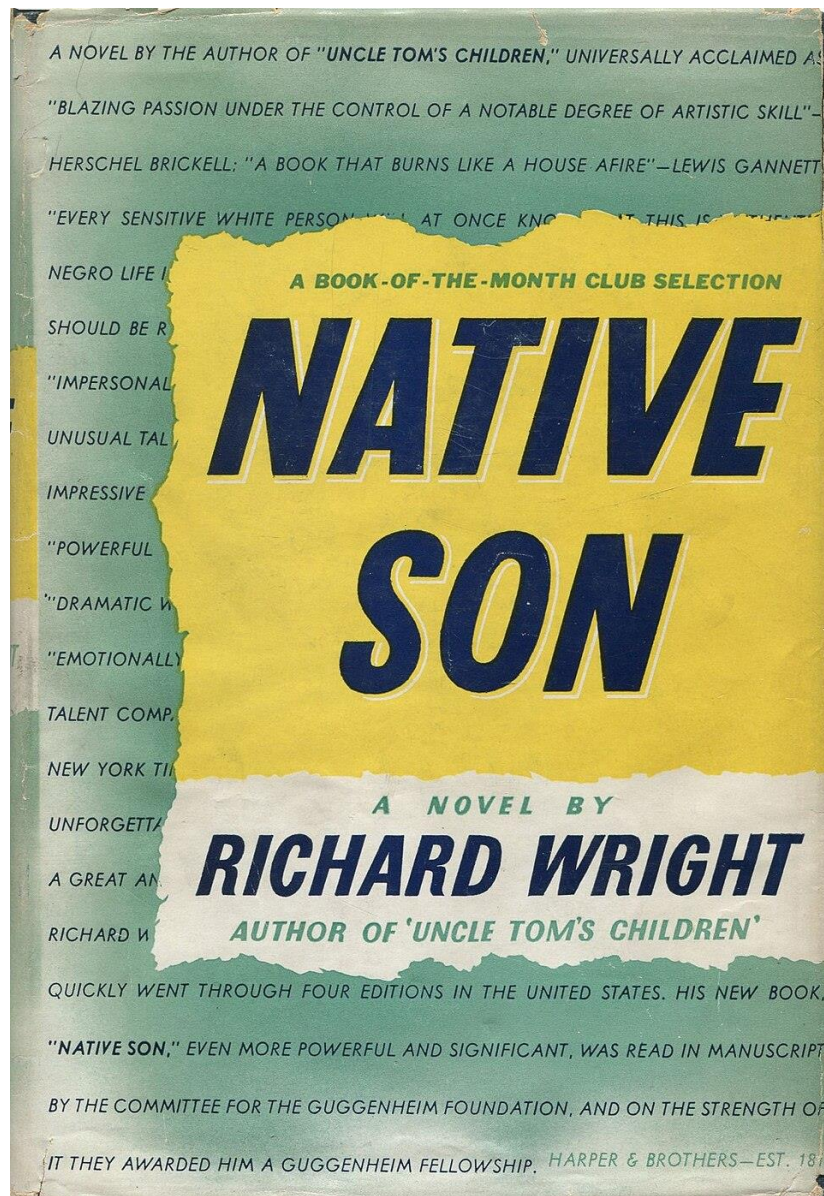
Native Son and African-American Naturalism

Native Son was that book.²⁶ It was a Book-of-the Month selection, sold more than 200,000 copies within a month of publication, and in 1940 became the number one best seller in America. It earned Wright instant fame and revealed that he, after all, was perhaps his own best critic, at least in explaining his greatest novel, as he did in “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” in May 1940.²⁷ “It is an accusation against the society of the United States,” Wright claimed, “and a defense of the Negro people, who still live in conditions very similar to slavery” (Conversations, 32). Composed of three parts – Fear, Flight, and Fate – the novel shows the influence of communism, a major intellectual and political force for Wright between 1933 and 1940; protest fiction, which extends the themes of racial fear and entrapment in *Uncle Tom’s Children* (and anticipates them in *Black Boy*); and finally urban realism, naturalistic determinism, sociological theory, racial violence, and existentialism. As James A. Miller has argued, Bigger Thomas, the novel’s protagonist and Wright’s most “enduring character,” has emerged as Wright predicted he would in “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” as one of the most powerful symbolic figures in American life, “the heritage of us all” (Bigger, 451).²⁸

²⁶ It must be noted that because Harper required Wright to tone down the novel’s sexual and political implications, the *Native Son* that he intended for publication in 1939 was never made available until 1991, when it was published in its entirety by the Library of America.

²⁷ Kinnamon, “How Native,” 210.

²⁸ Miller, 11.



First edition of *Native Son*, to be translated under the name *Enfant du pays*, Harper & Brothers, 1940, public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

The novel tells the story of Bigger Thomas, an impoverished twenty-year-old African American, who is living with his mother, brother, and sister on Chicago's South Side in the 1930s. Hired as a chauffeur, Bigger accidentally kills Mary Dalton, the daughter of wealthy (and "liberal"-minded) parents who are actually slum landlords and owners of the Thomases' kitchenette. Bigger burns Mary's body in a furnace then develops a plan to extort money from her parents. The first part is filled with socially realistic descriptions and symbolic scenes of black slum life. Images of curtains, blindness, walls, and "whiteness" — as an irrepressible naturalistic force — show the subsumed existence of blacks in white society. Part two traces how Bigger runs from the police; rapes and kills his girlfriend, Bessie; and is then caught and tried. Part three — more discursive, essayistic, and allegorical than the first two parts — outlines

Bigger's trial, conviction, and death sentence. Ultimately, although struggling to "see himself in relation to other men,"²⁹ Bigger is part of the black race, which "constitute[s] a separate nation, stunted, stripped, and held captive within this nation, devoid of political, social, economic, and property rights" (Native, 397), an idea that gives fictional life to W. E. B. Dubois's and Alain Locke's thesis that African Americans were trapped in a racially excluded subnation within a nation.³⁰

Native Son is also an important commentary on Black-Jewish relations. While Wright has sometimes been accused of Black anti-Semitism,³¹ *Native Son*, it can be argued, is an example of Wright's positive perceptions of Jews. Its rhetoric voices a common history between Jews and Blacks. Thus, for example, when Bigger fears that white people will hate Boris Max, his defense attorney, for helping a black man, Max replies that they already hate him for being a Jew, stating that "before I can fight your battle, I've got to fight a battle with them" (Native, 359). And when Bigger refuses to collaborate with the police because they "hate black folks," Max responds, "They hate others too. They hate me because I'm trying to help you. They're writing me letters calling me a 'dirty Jew'" (Native, 362). As Armengol contends, "the relationship between Bigger and Boris Max is depicted by Wright not only as a political alliance, however tenuous, between black nationalist and Communist ideals, as has usually been understood, but also between two oppressed ethnic groups, who are shown to share a history of race but also class and gender oppression."³² It is noteworthy that towards the end of his trial Bigger seems to accept the humanity of Jan Erlone, a Jewish member of the Communist Party, which makes Bigger feel remorseful for having killed Mary Dalton, the woman Erlone loved. Both Jan and Max urge Bigger "to believe in himself" (311) and appear to be his only "white" friends.³³ Ultimately, though, neither can get through to Bigger. At the end of the novel, Max is even portrayed as fearing him—"Max's eyes were full of terror" (Native, 429)—and feeling defeated and helpless—"Max groped for his hat like a blind man" (Native, 429). At the same

²⁹ Wright, *Native*, 361. Hereafter *Native*.

³⁰ See Alain Locke, "The New Negro," in Locke, *The New Negro* (1925). New York, Atheneum, 1992, pp. 3–16; and W. E. B. Dubois, "Criteria of Negro Art" in *Crisis*, October 1926, pp. 290–7.

³¹ See Arthur Scherr, "Jew in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*", 2003, 49–77. Black anti-Semitism is an antagonism or prejudice against Jews by some members of the Black community. Historically, these figures include activists, writers, and political leaders: e.g. Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson, Amira Baraka, and Louis Farrakhan, although certain of these leaders later modified their views. *Native Son* suggests Wright's perspective on Black anti-Semitism. As we will see in *Black Boy*, Wright self-reflectively chronicles his own religious anti-Semitism – generated by his repressive environment – and its widespread social effects. A subtext of my argument is that the history of Black-Jewish relations may help us better understand Wright's most famous works.

³² Armengol, 567.

³³ Armengol, 572.

time, however, what brings Bigger and Max together is “their shared oppression as racialized Others, which causes both of them to realize the inner workings of white racism.”³⁴ *Native Son* chronicles and highlights these interconnections.

Flawed though *Native Son* may be,³⁵ the critical consensus is that it became the novel that defined and influenced the entire spectrum of African American literature of the post–World War II period.³⁶ The landmark themes and techniques of *Native Son* were instrumental in performing this task: Wright was the first to portray a distinctively black psychology, the first to depict black ghetto life intricately from the point of view of an undereducated and poor black man, the first to interrogate sexual fears as the base of racial segregation, and the first to calibrate an urban naturalism and modernism to what he called “the main burden of all serious fiction [which] consists almost wholly of character destiny and the items, social, political, and personal, of that character destiny” (How, 459). Rejecting the ethic of racial celebration espoused by the Harlem Renaissance writers, Wright argued instead that African American writers should strive to produce realistic accounts of the black masses’ social and economic situations – and represent them through such destinies.

From 12 Million Voices to Black Boy: Between Fictionalization, Autobiography, and Social Sciences

Wright did just this – marking equations between race and class – in his next work, the photo-essay *12 Million Black Voices* (1941). By tracing a collective African American destiny, namely, “a complex movement of a debased feudal folk toward a twentieth-century urbanization,” *Black Voices* presents how Wright – although he “quietly” left the Communist Party, probably around 1942 – remained faithful to a Marxist vision of social change.³⁷ In *Black Voices*, Wright is a “sociological informant”³⁸ and, as demonstrated in *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, a believer in viewing the individual as representative of a group. As he explains in *Black Boy*, “[my] reading in sociology had enabled me to discern many strange types of Negro characters to identify many modes of Negro behavior” (BB, 284).

³⁴ Armengol, 568.

³⁵ Although Irving Howe famously wrote in 1963 that “the day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever” (*Dissent*, Autumn 1963, p. 354), there were detractors as well, critics who claimed that the novel was “dull propaganda” (Howard Mumford Jones, *Boston Evening Transcript*, March 2, 1940) and flawed with “paper-thin characters” (Clifton Fadiman, *New Yorker*, March 16, 1940).

³⁶ Gates and McKay, 1400.

³⁷ Wright, “Preface,” xx. Hereafter Preface.

³⁸ Cappetti, 182.

But in focusing on “those materials of Negro life identified with the countless black millions” (Preface, xxi), *Black Voices* also asks its readers to engage with its fictional aspect, its attempt to give voice, as Wright puts it in “Blueprint,” to “unwritten and unrecognized” black folklore (Blueprint, 1405). At the same time the literary influences inherent in *Black Voices* reflect Wright’s consideration that “Eliot , Stein , Joyce , Proust , Hemingway ; and Anderson ; Gorky , Barbusse , Nexo , and Jack London no less than the folklore of the Negro himself should form the heritage of the Negro Writer” (Blueprint, 1407). Correspondingly, it was *Black Voices* that, with “its investments in the Chicago School of Urban Sociology and the deterministic slant of its theories,”³⁹ would prove to be a starting point for Wright’s later forays into what most critics have called his travel writings of the 1950s: *Black Power* (1954), *White Man Listen!* (1957), and *The Color Curtain* (1956). *Black Voices* signals Wright’s trials to develop a stylistics that would mark his purchase on the social data he wanted to transform into fiction.

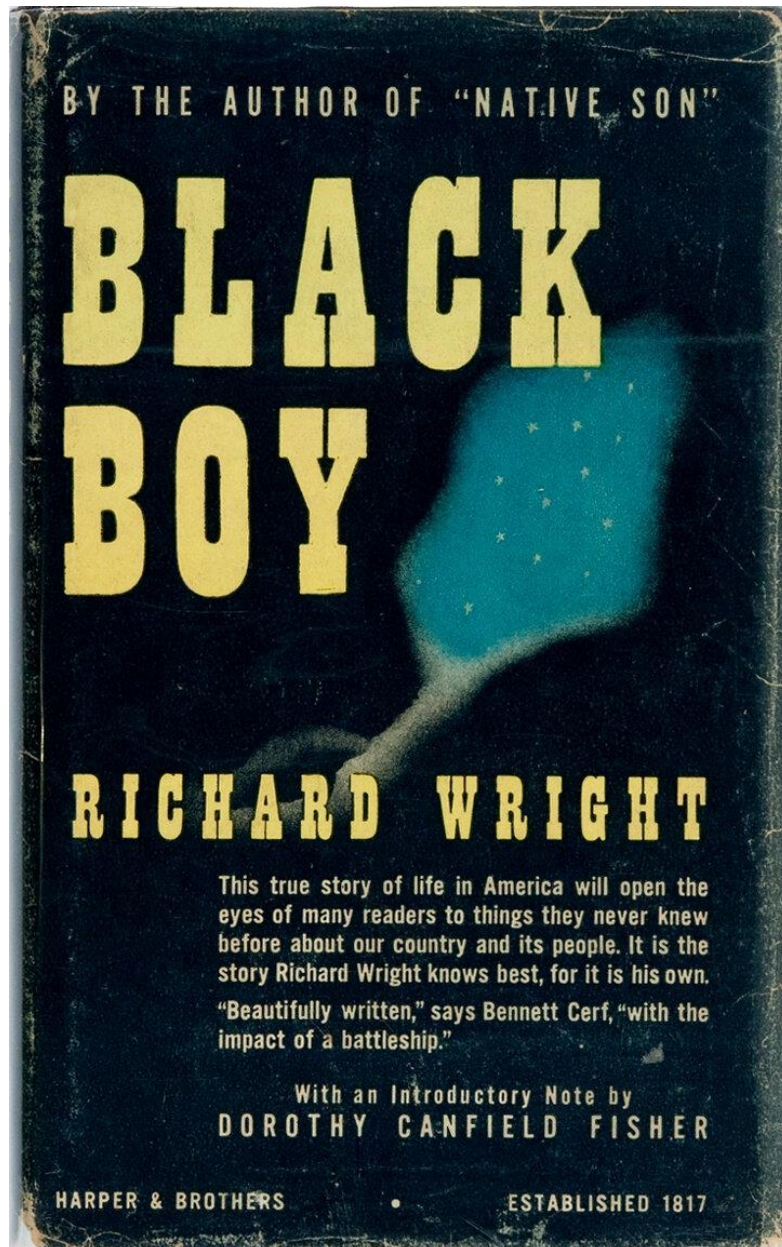
The lyrical power that makes *Black Voices*’s structure impressionistic rather than logical carried over into the fictionalized autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945).⁴⁰ Returning to the more pessimistic, deterministic manner of *Native Son*, while extending the sociological critique he presents in *Black Voices*, *Black Boy* renders Wright’s life from early childhood to his arrival in Chicago. Generally acclaimed as one of the finest autobiographies ever written by an American writer, *Black Boy* follows the long-standing tradition of African-American autobiographies – with its focus on “authenticity and sincerity.”⁴¹ Other examples include Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 1845; James Weldon Johnson ’s *Along the Way* , 1933; Claude McKay ’s *A Long Way from Home* , 1937; Mary Church Terrel’s *A Colored Woman in a White World* , 1940; and Malcolm X ’s *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* , 1965. But in so doing Wright provides a new definition of blackness – a blackness no longer based on a set of racial stereotypes but defined as a metaphysical condition of alienation and separation, a disturbing, complicated creation of contemporary culture. Wright laments in *Black Boy*,

³⁹ Gates and McKay, 1401.

⁴⁰ The unexpurgated edition of Wright’s autobiography would not appear until the Library of America printed the original manuscript as *Black Boy (American Hunger)* in 1991.

⁴¹ Andrews, 272.

“Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western Civilization, that they had lived somehow in it but not of it” (BB, 37).



First edition of *Black Boy*, Harper & Borthers, 1945 – public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

In its racial resignification, *Black Boy* anticipates a conception of race that is unstable, transcultural, and international. It also offers a commentary on Black-Jewish relations and the influence of social environment in creating racial and ethnic prejudice. For example, Wright understands that the folk ditties he learned as a child aimed against Jews were “mean” and “cruel”—though the Black community “actively or passively” (BB, 62) approved of them. “To hold an attitude of antagonism or distrust toward Jews” Wright summarizes, “was bred in us

from childhood; it was not merely racial prejudice, it was a part of our cultural heritage” (BB, 62). As *Black Boy* makes clear, some Jewish people humiliated Richard precisely because of their own precarious social position against Blacks (BB, 311–15). Similarly, Richard admits that the position of his Jewish coworkers, such as Don, “was not much better than [his]” (BB, 245). At the same time, as Arthur Scherr acknowledges, Jews are “virtually the only racial/ethnic group” in the book “that does not treat young Wright in a sadistic or exploitative manner”; their comparative respect for him differs substantially from that of his white employers and Black family members.⁴² Even more revealingly, many of the artists and writers Wright meets at The John Reed Club (e.g., “a Jewish boy who was to become one of the nation’s leading painters”; “a young Jewish boy who was destined to film the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia,” BB, 317) are Jewish. This group of people “whom [Richard] would know for decades to come...were to form the first sustained relationships in [his] life” (BB, 317).⁴³ *Black Boy* explores the multiple, complex, and often contradictory cultural interactions between Black and Jews, emphasizing both their shared history of struggle and oppression as well as their differences and specificities.

While changing the perception and reception of African American and American literature, *Black Boy* elucidates perhaps the most severe economic hardships ever experienced by a major American writer and provides explanations for – and personal resistances to – those hardships. “I wanted to render a judgement on my environment,” Wright said of *Black Boy*; “[t]hat judgement was this: the environment the South creates is too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings” (Conversations, 64–5). Above all, *Black Boy* is a systematic unfolding of the processes of an artistic development in a disruptive and brutal environment, a development that comes to full fruition in the second part of the autobiography, *American Hunger*, published in 1977.

A Literary Work Steeped in Travel and Diverse Inspirations

Wright would spend the rest of his life responding to the foreign environments he traveled or lived in – including England, France, Spain, Western Africa, Indonesia – in relation

⁴² Sherr, 56.

⁴³ It must be noted that Wright had life-long relationships with Jewish women. As Armengol observes, “Besides marrying classical dancer and political leftist Dhimah Rose Meadman and, later on, Communist party functionary Ellen Poplar, both Jewish, he indulged in an extramarital affair with the young Jewish-American woman Edith Anderson,” 570.

to his ongoing thinking about the racially imploding United States. He moved to Paris two years after *Black Boy* was published and would stay there until his death in 1960. His next work, *The Outsider* (1953), represented a certain separation from his former writing and the political and social beliefs he held in America. In Paris Wright commented that “the break from the U.S. was more than a geographical change,” but “a break with my former attitudes as a Negro and a Communist [...] I was trying to grapple with the big problem – the problem and meaning of western civilization as a whole and the relation of Negroes and other minority groups to it.”⁴⁴

While living in France in the 1950s, Wright became associated with the French existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus and other writers involved with the journal *Les Temps Modernes*. Wright’s concern with the situation of black intellectuals in the West and his increasing engagement (and disengagement) with existentialism are represented by Cross Damon, the central character of *The Outsider*, and his rejection of essentialist forms of identity.

In the context of his own modern consciousness – and outside the confines of conventional racial ideologies – Wright, like Cross Damon, wished to understand race not as biological necessity but as a social category. Thus Cross, early in the novel, tells us in a flat existential declaration, “[a] man creates himself,”⁴⁵ though the novel both affirms and denies this claim: social forces, beyond Cross’s control, eventually destroy him. At the same time, Wright, despite clinging to an independent (and racially conflicted) “outsider” status (as the narrators do in *Black Boy*, *Black Power*, and *The Color Curtain*), “never disavows his own experience of Black oppression and resistance” and the challenges that his environments posed.

⁴⁶ On an aesthetic level, *The Outsider* is representative in demonstrating Wright’s lifelong fascination for crime novels, pulp fiction, and the gothic – beginning with *Lawd Today!* but permeating such works as *Eight Men* (1961) and *Native Son* – along with his ability to combine such genres.

The Outsider received mostly mixed to negative reviews, as did Wright’s next work, *Savage Holiday* (1954), a new orientation for Wright bearing witness to his fascination with Freudian psychology and his shift to exploring nonracial issues. Wright’s last published novel in his lifetime, *The Long Dream* (1958), was somewhat of a return to the themes of *Black Boy*

⁴⁴ Andrews, 272.

⁴⁵ Wright, *Outsider*, 65.

⁴⁶ West, “Introduction,” ix.

and the subject matter of *Uncle Tom's Children* : a black rural folk culture's imbrications with dominant white communities.

Influenced by his association with the writers of the Negritude movement, including Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire , Wright became increasingly interested in Indonesian and African liberation movements. Between 1953 and 1957 he traveled to Spain, Indonesia, and Africa and completed work on four sociopolitical travel narratives and essays – *Black Power* (1954), *The Color Curtain* (1956), *Pagan Spain* (1957), and *White Man Listen!* (1957). While many critics thought that Wright's best creative years were behind him because he became "cut off" from his native roots, his exile years, it can be argued, allowed him to write from a richer and more complex historical and psychological perspective. Rather than impoverishing Wright's work, his postwar years – as argued variously by the Wright critics Michel Fabre , Paul Gilroy , and Jerry W. Ward Jr.⁴⁷ – can be seen as the most vital record for understanding his objectives and aspirations as a writer.

Conclusion

Most essentially, Wright's fiction and nonfiction demand to be taken beyond borders and boundaries, to be interpreted in relation to what it means to write the African American literary text into a world literary history. Wright's crossover strategies between distinct literary genres, between "modernist" and "naturalist" and "high" cultures, on the one hand, and "popular" and "pulp" and "low" cultures, on the other; between writing about feeling at home (racially, culturally, socially) neither in one's native land (America) nor in one's land of exile (France) are only beginning to be recognized by Wright critics. While signaling the dangers of fascism and anti-Semitism, his best work asks crucial questions with regard to national alienation and international belonging and to race as a superimposed category, rather than a biological reality. His fiction, and almost all his nonfiction, easily lifts beyond the center of African American culture. It also explores the potentialities and limits of a black transnationalism, a transnative status, and presents Wright as a perpetual "outsider" whose activism, like his literary work, is characterized by a "essential humanness" ⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ See for example Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1993); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993); and Jerry W. Ward, «A Conversation on Richard Wright.» *Valley Voices: A Literary Review*, 2012, vol. 2, no. 2, 148.



Statue of Richard Wright on Jackson Place, Jackson, Mississippi, in 2008 - [via Wikimedia Commons](#).

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⁴⁸ Wright, *Black Power*, 704.

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