Richard Wright—Black Boy
Rounds Scholarly Conference Circuit

by Kelley Norman

Before Richard Wright—Black Boy airs on PBS on September 4, the first film documentary of the writer will have toured scholarly literary conferences from the West Coast to the East.

The documentary’s first stop was the Modern Language Association in San Diego, California, where it was well received by an audience of more than 200. The panel members were director/writer, Madison Davis Lacy, producer Guy Land, and Wright scholar Kenneth Kinnamon of the University of Arkansas. Panelists talked about the process of making the film and answered questions for 45 minutes.

Appearing as the sole panelist at the Louisville Conference on 20th Century Literature, Tieder Harris of Emory University made several critical observations, particularly about the filmic interpretation of Wright’s work.

In her opinion, although some dramatizations distort Wright’s work and lend a false impression to first-time viewers of the texts, the teacher who takes on a more active role as facilitator can make good use of the film.

Danielle Taylor-Guthrie, who presented at the plenary session of the National Association of Humanities Education conference in Cincinnati, Ohio with fellow panelist John M. Reilly of Howard University, thought that the film’s intent—to reveal Wright the man and artist—was also its strength. The film should not be considered a definitive source of literary interpretation, she said.

Taylor-Guthrie stated that this film “lays the groundwork and emphasizes key points of Richard Wright’s life without sensationalizing aspects of it, and reveals Wright’s growth as a maturing statesman and artist through his works Black Power, Pagan Spain and White Man, Listen!” She also noted that an ironic element was presented to the audience that only the film medium could convey: the disparity between the powerful literary voice of Wright’s written works and the soft speaking voice of the writer, whom few people have heard.

Reilly explored the social causation of America’s racial conditions revealed in Wright’s work, which shocked white readers at the time: “When Wright challenges the racial discourse by tapping into an alternative racial discourse in his fiction, he presents us with the complexity of African-American subjectivity.”

Northeastern University and the Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts collaborated on the Boston premiere of Black Boy. Three screenings, one of which featured panelists Madison Davis Lacy, Maryemma Graham and Julia Wright, attracted an audience that totalled more than 400.

An enthusiastic audience took advantage of the opportunity to query the panelists: Lacy shared critical moments in the making of the film—getting an interview with Ralph Ellison, for example. Graham noted the importance of reading and viewing biography—including film biography—as one of the several ways to know an author, but discouraged heavy reliance on any single biography.

“For a writer as important as Richard Wright,” she offered, “all biographies are important and each offers us something we can learn about the author that the other doesn’t provide.”

Julia Wright’s forthcoming Memoirs will give us yet another understanding of Wright, distinguishing between the voice of Wright critics and her own personal voice which she noted was absent from previous biographies.

MELUS chairperson Amritjit Singh arranged two film screenings at the annual conference in Providence, RI, and invited Julia Wright to his undergraduate seminar class on Rich-

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ard Wright and Toni Morrison. After a reading of the murder of Bessie in *Native Son*, Julia Wright suggested a "horizontal" approach to that excerpt—freely associating from it to other pages and episodes in other Wright works, before referring "vertically" to critical or academic interpretations.

Involving Singh's students in a creative, circular search for the author's own intent in having Bigger kill Bessie, Wright highlighted two key episodes in *Black Boy*: the killing of the kitten and Uncle Matthew's killing of his own girlfriend so that she would not "tell." The students themselves then volunteered that the Bessie-like kitten symbolized the plaintive, inarticulate lack of independence and self-control which Jim Crow Ethics had taught the child, Richard, to kill within himself if he were to survive.

Wright then submitted that it was not Bessie’s sex Richard Wright feared but her lack of strength and her near addictive need for a protection that Bigger as a powerless black male was unable to give her. The contrast between Aunt Sue’s death in *Bright and Morning Star*—and Bessie’s death in *Native Son* gives us a clue to the qualities Richard Wright respected in women, Wright noted.

At the American Literature Association's meeting in Baltimore, Maryland a screening of the first half-hour of the film accompanied a session focusing on the film. Panelist Keneth Kinnaman surveyed the process of composing the film, noting that only a few pieces of live footage were available to Lacy; John Reilly contextualized Wright's work; and Yoshinobu Hakutani of Kent State University commented on the visual power of the film to supplement the teaching of the autobiography, suggesting that Wright evoked poetic sensibility as he wrote about alienation and described character and scene. Jerry Ward and Maryemma Graham introduced Richard Wright—*Black Boy* and held a freestyle discussion with 50 audience members at the annual meeting of the College Language Association in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Expecting both criticism and praise of his documentary, Lacy believes that academic conferences are "the most appropriate arena" for this kind of critical discussion: "Let the film get the slings and arrows it deserves, but I know I could be far more critical than any of the academics about what I could have done because I know what I was striving for."

Like many other scholars and viewers, he believes the film to be a strong documentary based on sound scholarship and intended for a broad audience. He explains that in any filmic effort something is lost in the process of simplifying an abundance of material to fit within a specific time-frame: "These kinds of films colloquialize the material because you want a broad audience, many of whom many not have heard of Wright, to gain access to the material and his life. And, if after seeing this film, viewers are motivated to read Wright’s works then the film has done its job, because ultimately the film is not the end-all of Wright’s work; Wright’s works are."

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**Letter from the Editors**

The last half year has been an unusually active one for the Richard Wright Circle. While the source of that activity has primarily been the national tour of *Richard Wright—Black Boy*, other factors signal the extent to which the newsletter continues to explore various ramifications of our national and international landscape. In the nation and in the world at large, academic and literary concerns share equal time with a complicated public discourse which reminds us that freedom from oppression is never to be taken for granted. Contributors have offered new insights on the relationship between Wright and Carson McCullers, a white southern writer whom Wright seemed to prefer to Faulkner. This topic and indeed Wright’s views on southern white literature remain a relatively unexplored aspect of southern intellectual history. Readers will welcome the special report on Bosnia, a country whose current and past history would have invited Wright’s interests were he still alive. Publication and professional conference activities continue to increase, marking the anniversary of his classic autobiography. If all this appears to be unconnected, we are reminded that Wright was committed to dismantling the categories into which we could place the knowledge about experience and the human expression of that knowledge. What is personal is political, what is private is indeed public, and it has become increasingly more difficult to see the individual in opposition to the social. Certainly Wright’s art was characterized by a healthy tension regarding these seeming polarities, a tension that served as a driving force in his life, and one that we replicate with this, our largest issue to date.

Maryemma Graham  
Jerry W. Ward, Jr.
FOR MUMIA ABU-JAMAL

by Julia Wright

Mumia Abu-Jamal has lost his last appeal and is now sentenced to go to the electric chair on August 17. Many feel that he is being victimized because of statements he made on behalf of the Black Panther Party at age sixteen. His account of his experience is documented in Live from Death Row, with a preface by J.E. Wideman. A journalist, Abu-Jamal's struggle to live has been endorsed by Alice Walker, Whoopi Goldberg, Sonia Sanchez, E.L. Doctorow, William Kunstler, E.D. Asner, and others.

Fifty-five years ago, although Richard Wright had finished Native Son, he couldn't get Bigger out of his mind. Although the jail door had clanged shut leaving Bigger to face the electric chair, Bigger's "faint, wry, bittersmile" continued to haunt Wright—and us. Having laid Bigger uneasily to rest, having written, in "How Bigger was Born," that this symbolic figure of American life "would hold within him the prophecy of our future," Wright felt a need to act out his concern for real-life Biggers, and he paid particular attention to the letters he received from black prisoners who identified with Bigger. With the help of Dr. Frederic Wertham, the reputed psychiatrist who had written Dark Legend, Wright saved one of those prisoners, Clinton Brewer, from death row. Michel Fabre even recounts in his biography on Wright, The Unfinished Quest, that when Dr. Wertham and Wright visited Brewer in prison, the prison guard tried to refuse entry to Wright: "Doctor, we know you very well and you have always behaved reasonably but you should not go to such trouble for a black man. There are no prejudices here—we have as many black prisoners as white...."

That was back in 1941. Since then, from both sides of the Atlantic, other writers have interceded on behalf of African-Americans on death row: there have been Norman Mailer's rather media-prone, "radical chic" interventions—Jean Genet's impassioned introduction to George Jackson's prison letters, an introduction which ended with these words: "And their eyes are clear. Not blue."

I am convinced that my father, Richard Wright, would have taken on the challenge of Mumia Abu-Jamal's pending execution on August 17. He would of course have criticized the McCarthyist overtones of Abu-Jamal's trial. He would characteristically have argued that a journalist like Abu-Jamal who is capable of using "words as weapons" would not have needed to use a gun in the literal sense. He would have mused wryly that a half a century after the execution of his own Bigger, here is a black prisoner who, unlike Bigger, has not been proved to be a murderer, who is a humanist and a writer, and who is articulately involved in the struggle for human rights and not only capable of telling his own story but that of his fellow-prisoners...

And yet, for all these qualities and probably because of them, Mumia Abu-Jamal is scheduled to die like Bigger. And so the double bind goes on. Paris, June 26, 1995

For more information contact the Committee to Save Mumia Abu-Jamal at:

163 Amsterdam Ave. #115
New York, NY 10023
Ph. # (212) 580-1022

The Richard Wright Newsletter supports review and intervention in cases involving political prisoners.

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Announcements

Emmy for Lacy's Film Biography

Madison Davis Lacy's film biography, Richard Wright—Black Boy, won an Emmy on June 17 in Atlanta for the best documentary over 30 minutes to have aired in the Southeast Region during 1994. The Emmy is awarded by the local National Association of Television Arts and Sciences and is the highest award in television. The film will be eligible for a national Emmy after it airs on PBS on September 4, 1995, which is the anniversary of Richard Wright's birth in 1908.

Rite of Passage Picked

Rite of Passage, published recently by HarperCollins for Young Adults (see Richard Wright Newsletter, Volume 3, Numbers 1 and 2), has been included on the Notable Children's Trade Books in the Field of Social Sciences for 1995 list, selected by a committee sponsored by the National Council for the Social Studies—Children's Book Council. This list was published in the April/May 1995 issue of Social Educations.

King Cotton: The 6th Annual Natchez Literary Celebration

"Mississippi's Most Significant Annual Conference Devoted to Literature, History and Culture" was held on June 1-3, 1995. Look for a report from the Natchez Literary Celebration in the next issue of the Richard Wright Newsletter.

This article reexamines the acceptance of Wright's American Hunger, first published separately in 1977 and then in the Library of America's combined edition of Black Boy (American Hunger) in 1991, as Wright's definitive account of his experience with the Communist Party. The article makes a detailed comparison of the material on Communism in American Hunger with "I Tried to Be a Communist," the magazine condensation of the same material printed in the Atlantic Monthly in 1944 and reprinted in R.H.S. Crossman's influential anthology The God That Failed (1949). The comparison shows that the condensed text presents a harsher, more negative picture of Communism than Wright's original text; the change is brought about through omitting qualifications, favorable reflections of Communism's historical potential, etc. Though such a situation might suggest editorial interference with the author's intentions, in fact Wright accepted the condensed text and showed his approval of it by reprinting it unchanged in 1949.

Comparison with the treatment of Communism in The Outsider (1952) helps to explain Wright's action: the sharply negative presentation in "I Tried" and The God That Failed is closer than American Hunger to Wright's later view of Communism as expressed in this novel.

The article proposes that the American Hunger text should be regarded as a provisional rather than definitive treatment of Wright's communist experience, and that "I Tried"/The God That Failed should be viewed as authoritative articulations of Wright's evolving view of Communism.

"Pan Africanism: Facing the Future in Unity, Social Progress, and Democracy"
The 7th Pan African Congress meets in Kampala, Uganda, April 2-8, 1994

From Ebon Dooley's article in "7th Pan African Congress: A Special Report," published by People's Tribune and Justice Speaks

The role of the IMF/World Bank and the various structural adjustment programs they demand was the major topic of discussion throughout the Congress.

Some attempts were made to distinguish between "Black Africa" and "Arab Africa" and discussions of conflicts such as the armed struggle between North and South Sudan almost disrupted the Congress, but unity prevailed and all parties agreed that the main enemy of the African people has been and remains the imperialist powers of Europe and the United States.

One objective of the Congress was to construct "an institutional framework within which the diversity of African organizations can build unity, social progress and democracy." To this end, the Congress voted to establish a permanent secretariat in Kampala, Uganda and to hold the 8th PAC in Tripoli, Libya in 1997.

Chronology of the Pan African Congress Movement
1900 London
1919 Paris (1st)
1921 London and Brussels (2nd)
1923 London and Lisbon (3rd)
1927 New York (4th)
1945 Manchester (5th)
1958 Accra, Ghana (All African Peoples Congress)
1963 Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (Organization of African Unity)
1974 Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (6th)
1994 Kampala, Uganda (7th)

To order copies of the Special Report from the 7th Pan African Congress or for information on the 7th PAC Speakers Bureau, contact:

People's Tribune
P.O. Box 3524
Chicago, IL 60654
Ph. # (312) 486-3551

Justice Speaks
P.O. Box 1339
Rocky Mount, NC 27802
Ph. # (919) 446-1307
Mentions of Richard Wright in Carson McCullers's Unfinished Autobiography "Illumination and Night Glare"

Carlos L. Dews
Department of English and Foreign Languages
University of West Florida

Before meeting Carson McCullers, Richard Wright wrote a review of The Heart is a Lonely Hunter for the August 5, 1940 issue of The New Republic. This review includes Wright's discussion of McCullers's ability to "treat negroes and white people with the same ease" (Dews 156):

To me the most impressive aspect of "The Heart is a Lonely Hunter" is the astonishing humanity that enables a white writer, for the first time in Southern fiction, to handle Negro characters with as much ease and justice as those of her own race. This cannot be accounted for stylistically or politically; it seems to stem from an attitude toward life which enables Miss [sic] McCullers to rise above the pressure of her environment and embrace white and black humanity in one sweep of apprehension and tenderness. (195)

Carson McCullers and Richard Wright first met in the summer of 1941 when Wright, his wife Ellen, and their infant daughter Julia, moved into an apartment in the house McCullers shared with George Davis and other artists on Middagh Street in Brooklyn. Their friendship continued in France where McCullers and her husband Reeves visited Wright and his family in Paris in 1947. Details of Carson and Reeves's friendship with Richard and Ellen Wright are included in Constance Webb's Richard Wright: A Biography (194-6, 269-73); and in Virginia Spencer Carr's The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers (127-9, 220, 224, 282-3, 290-1, 394).

In her unfinished autobiography "Illumination and Night Glare," on which McCullers worked during the final four months of her life, Richard Wright is mentioned in two passages. The first, which appears on page 62 of McCullers's 128-page autobiographical work, details one of McCullers's debilitating strokes which occurred during August 1947, while she was in Paris:

I left L'Ancienne Presbyter [McCullers's name for the farm house she and her husband purchased in the countryside outside of Paris] for a few days to recover my balance and to visit my old friends, Richard and Ellen Wright, in Paris and while there, alone in the house, this final stroke happened. I was just going to the bathroom when I fell on the floor. At first it seemed to me that the left side of my body was dead. I could feel the skin clammy and cold with my right hand. I screamed, but no one answered, no one was there. I lay on the floor, helpless, from about eight in evening all through the night until dawn, when finally my screams were heard. (Dews 114)

This stroke occurred in the home of McCullers's friends Ira and Edita Morris, not in the Wrights' home, as the autobiographical passage seems to suggest. Carr details this stroke in her biography of McCullers (291-2).

The second passage regarding Wright appears on pages 101 through 103 of McCullers's text:

Another writer who was particularly dear to me is Richard Wright. Nothing could be more of a contrast than Tania [McCullers's nickname for her friend Baroness Karen Blixen-Finecke (Isak Dinesen)] and Dick were. I met him in the house in Brooklyn when he moved in with his wife and baby. As usual there were no decent places for negroes to live. Later, we resumed our friendship in Paris where he lived until his sudden death. His death always gives me a sense of the great fragility of human life. Dick, apparently perfectly well, had just gone to the doctor for a routine check-up. The doctor saw nothing alarming, but that very afternoon he died of heart failure. Dick and I often discussed the South, and his book, Black Boy, is one of the finest books by a Southern negro. He said of my work that I was the one Southern writer who was able to treat negroes and white people with the same ease. I was so appalled by the humiliation that being a negro in the South automatically entailed that I lost sight of the gradations of respectability and prestige within the negro race.

When Reeves and I were living in a terribly run-down apartment in Paris, without private toilette and conveniences, Dick, who was moving from his own apartment and had paid for the cle [French for key] of an elegant apartment also in Paris, suggested that we move into his fine du-plex. The woman who owned and lived in the other apartment was a dope addict, and he didn't want his child exposed to the sight of addiction even at second hand. Of course we moved in and the place was indeed charming; an open fire-place in the living room and the luxury of a complete dining room.

When I suffered the stroke that paralyzed me on the left side, Dick was in Nice and he chartered a plane to take me to Paris and to comfort me there. (Handwritten emendation in the manuscript of Continued on Page 6)
McCullers Recalls Wright From Page 5

McCullers's autobiography changed the "me" in this sentence to "him," and "take me to Paris" to "visit me at the American Hospital."] His mother, told me, had suffered a similar stroke and brought up a number of children in spite of it.

Before out friendship in Brooklyn Dick had become entangled with the Communist Party. A native negro, intensely verbal, and an intellectual, was just their meat. They did not understand Dick's complete absorption in his art, and when the Party started to dictate to him what to write, like school assignments, he was furious and quit the Party. [McCuller's manuscript was edited to include "nor his independence either" following the word "art" in this sentence.]

As everybody knows it is not easy to leave the Communist Party once you're involved, and Dick had many uneasy nights and fearful days; it is easier to join the Party than to get out. (Dews 155-8)

Webb describes Wright's reaction to McCuller's description of her stroke and provides further details of Wright's helping Reeves and Carson following the stroke in her biography of Wright (269-73).

Carson McCullers, writing during the final months of her life, despite constant pain and paralysis due to her numerous strokes, remembered those who were most important in her life and to her work and included them in her autobiography. McCullers chose to include details of her friendships with Richard Wright, Isak Dinesen, Tennessee Williams, and John Huston, among others, not only because of the contributions and recognition they gave to her work but, perhaps more importantly, because of the much needed help they provided during some of the darkest moments of her life.

Works Cited


Reflections on the Black Male of the 'Twenties and 'Thirties

By Clarence Hunter
Archivist, Coleman Library
Tougaloo College

Delivered at "Tougaloo College Reads Richard Wright: A Symposium to Honor the Fiftieth Anniversary of Black Boy" on March 9, 1995 at Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, Mississippi.

I welcome the opportunity to reflect on some of the issues faced by black Americans during the first half of this century and how those issues can be seen in the writings of Richard Wright. To me many of Wright's works epitomize the American dilemma more than an analysis, sociological study, or editorializing can do.

I have chosen as my topic: "Reflections on the Black Male of the 'Twenties and 'Thirties." I have chosen this topic for the following reasons: (1) Much of Wright's writings capture the frustration, hardship, toil, and fears of the black male during this period as he attempts to negotiate the oppression that existed in this society. (2) If you were born in this period, as I was, as you read Wright and similar authors who wrote during this period, you begin to draw analogies between the characters and situations that he creates and those that you met during your childhood. When I read about Nathaniel Wright in Black Boy, I see my father and his friends. I sense the kind of frustration, anger, disillusionment and fear that they must have felt but could not express openly. (3) There has been a great hue and cry about the black male becoming an endangered species, yet when you review the lives of the black males of this period, you get a sense of resilience, a type of quiet courage, a determination to survive despite the obstacles. This is a sense that we should remember. Remember that the black male survived the holocaust of slavery, the poverty of serfdom on the tenant farm, the inhuman oppression of the American apartheid and yet continues to survive. Let us not forget that when we speak of endangered species.

These two decades were indeed a most trying period. Rayford Logan, the prominent black historian and Chair of the History Department at Howard University from 1942 until 1964, referred to this period as the nadir of black existence in the United States. AND IT WAS!!! The Plessey vs. Ferguson decision of 1896 created a segregated society in the South which was not dissimilar to that of South Africa. It was a closed society, so closed and so racially structured that each person had to know his or her place or suffer the consequences: early on you learned how to act—primarily as a male you learned how to act in the presence of a white woman. Listen to Wright in Black Boy:

"Do you want this job?" the woman asked.
"Yes ma'am," I said afraid to trust my own judgement . . . all attention.
"Do you steal?" she asked me seriously.
I burst into a laugh, then checked myself.
"What's so damn funny about"

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Reflections on the Black Male
From Page 6

that?” she asked.

“Lady, if I was a thief, I'd never tell anybody.”

“What do you mean?” she blazed with a red face.
I had made a mistake during my first five minutes in the white world. I hung my head.

“No ma'am,” I mumbled, “I don’t steal.”

This closed society unleashed the twin furies of physical violence and psychological intimidation. The KKK and their cohorts preyed on black people and clubbed them into submission. Lynching became routine. The era of the Scottsboro Boys where nine black boys were accused of raping rat infested cells. Wright captures the character of the time in Twelve Million Black Voices:

And we cannot fight back; we have no arms; we cannot vote; and the law is white. There are no black policemen, black jurors, black mayors, or black men anywhere in the government of the South. The Ku Klux Klan attacks us in a thousand ways, driving our boys and girls off the jobs in the cities and keeping us who live on the land from protesting or asking too many questions.

Aside from outright violence there were economic structures as well. In 1928-9, the year when Martin Luther King and I were born, the world was convulsed in a great depression. Everyone suffered, yet the poor suffered more. The black male suffered the worst, there was always a need for the black woman to wash the clothes, to cook the meals, to nurse the children, yet the black male—particularly those without any skills—suffered dearly. My mother worked as a domestic; my father could not find work because the company he worked for had no hardware orders. They kept my father on the work rolls, because he was a good worker. My father was beholden to the white man. He could feed his family and keep us together. He sacrificed his dignity, but he performed his duty.

Even in these hardest times racism reared its ugly head and thwarted the efforts of the Federal Government to meet many of the needs of black people. In his attempt to feed his family, to hold his community together, to maintain some sense of individuality and human dignity, the black man was hard pressed on all sides. Picture Reverend Taylor in “Fire and Cloud”:

A self-made man, a leader of his people, respected by most of its members, struggling to meet the needs of his congregation; yet the society demands that he pay fealty to the Lords of the Land. He is a boy to racist sheriffs, a pawn in the hands of the white mayor, accosted by policemen and reared by white women. He is consumed by anger, tormented by confusion, and paralyzed by fear.

The physical oppression, the economic deprivation, and the total injustice of the period was supported by the philosophy of social Darwinism which was supposed to give some credence to the action of a white society and culture. For social Darwinism pictured black people as inferior and the force of the oppression was necessary to keep black people in their place.

Yet black men survived during this period through various ways. Some fled the South and found opportunities in the North. Some joined those organizations which defended the rights of blacks and worked toward an uplifting of the spirit—such as the Garvey Movement, the NAACP, the Urban League, the Association of Sleeping Car Porters, the Woodson Negro History Clubs, and above all the church. The church became the bulwark of the black community and the place where the black male could restore some of his dignity. Again let us listen to Wright in Twelve Million Black Voices:

Our churches are where we dip our tired bodies in cool springs of hope, where we retain our whole-ness and humanity despite the blows of death from the Bosses of the Buildings.

Yet not every man who ventured North was successful.

Many found solace on the corner or in alcohol. Many were forced into menial jobs far below their abilities. Many squandered their earnings on worthless trinkets and fell into a life of crime-wasting their lives away in prison. Many like Nathaniel Wright returned to the South and the soil, to live out their dreams in poverty. Wright wrote of his father in Black Boy:

Far from beyond the horizons that bound this bleak plantation there had come to me through my living the knowledge that my father was a black peasant who had gone to the city seeking life, but whose life had been hopelessly snarled in the city and who had at last fled the city—the same city which had lifted me in its burning arms and borne me toward alien and undreamed of shores of knowing.

In 1992 I returned home to Washington, D.C. on the very day that Thurgood Marshall died. Since this was to be the longest period that I was to remain at home, I focused my journal on recalling Thurgood in all the places that he and I had shared—he as a jurist, I as a child, student and man. My last place that I visited was Arlington Cemetery where Thurgood is buried, where my father-in-law is buried, where Medgar Evers is buried, and where my parents are buried. In my journal I wrote, “This is a beautiful day, like the day when Daddy and I stood here.” He would only live another month and he knew it. His last words to me were “I’m proud of you son, you’ve done well with your life. I wish I could’ve been of more help, but I did the best I could with what I had.”

Richard Wright was writing of my father when he wrote in Twelve Million Black Voices: “We ask you to grant us nothing. We are winning our heritage, though our toll in suffering is great.”
Bosnia: A Return to the Tyranny of the Majority
by Rich Heyman

Richard Wright was fascinated by Indonesia, Spain, and Africa. From his non-fiction travel books, Pagan Spain, The Color Curtain, and Black Power, and from his work as a journalist in the '40's, we can only extrapolate what his reaction to the war in the former Yugoslavian might have been, had he lived. And although it is true that Wright died 29 years before the end of the Cold War and the inception of the Yugoslav crisis, the war there foregrounds the very issues of multiculturalism Wright would have defended today. In September 1994 Rich Heyman, Editorial Assistant for the Richard Wright Circle, travelled to the former Yugoslavia and spent several days in the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo. He filed this report for the Richard Wright Newsletter.

Sunday morning after a thunderstorm. A warm day, and I stand with my brother and another UN official, a French woman, on the balcony of her apartment in the former Olympic Village looking out over the city center. Quiet notes from a neighbor’s piano in the apartment above descend through the humid air. From up here, you can still glimpse the former beauty of Sarajevo, a mixture of modern Europe and its Muslim past, evidence of Sarajevo’s unique and historic position, literally at the crossroads of trading routes linking Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, making it the meeting point of different cultures and religions: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Islam, Judaism. High-rises and minarets jut up from the valley floor, and if you aren’t looking too closely you might miss the dark shell holes splattered on the sides of every building and the many minarets that have been clipped off near the top. It is quiet, too quiet for such a magnificent city that was once home to more than 500,000 people. Whole street and motorway systems lie eerily unused.

When a driver in a UN armored vehicle changes gears on the other side of the city, you can hear it from here. Chunky white and grey clouds speed past the narrow valley, as if they don’t want to linger too long over this place of former glories and current horrors.

Exposed on this balcony, I am skittish, and I jump back against the wall as soon as I hear the first whoosh followed quickly by a dull thud, indicating a mortar detonation. The Serbs are shelling at the front line across the valley, visible through the rising mist, wounding its way up the grassy hill opposite as if haphazardly cut with pinking shears, then disappearing into the trees at the summit. A few seconds pass, and then another whoosh-pause-thud. This time the Bosnian army fires back with the baba-bat-bat-bat-bat of heavy machine-guns. Though the mortars are landing several miles away, I can feel the shock wave of the detonation pass though my body. I look across the valley but can see no sign of the exchange. After several minutes each side has another turn, and they continue lazily for the next couple of hours exchanging mortars for machine guns rounds every ten minutes or so. I soon calm down, with reassurances from Jeff and Patricia that we are not in the line of fire. So quickly that I am almost shocked when I realize it later, I stop noticing the detonations. I listen instead to the piano player, who has continued to play throughout the incident. How quickly we learn to shut things out, to find ways of ignoring the horror around us.

Patricia’s phone rings, and I am amazed that it works because in Sarajevo there is no running water, no electricity, no mail, no garbage collection, not even any currency (all transactions are in German Marks or Dollars, sometimes in a mixture of the two). Chuck, one of their fellow workers from the UN Radio Unit and a Canadian, is on the line. The shells are falling in his neighborhood near the hospital where Radovan Karadzic, leader of the Bosnian Serbs, used to practice psychiatry. We arrange to meet him for lunch at the UN cafeteria in the town center, near the shopping district and the old Muslim bazaar.

Despite the morning’s bout of shelling, this week has been one of the quietest in the city’s two-year long siege. Both sides seem to be waiting for the Pope to announce whether he will be making a visit here next week. The quietness and the warm Sunday sun have brought out many residents, who stroll the car-less streets. At the café tables sit the few young men, missing limbs, smoking cigarettes rolled in newsprint. A UN truck gently works its way up the narrow street carrying a fuel bladder, destined for some power generator.

Every building is riddled with bullet holes, and plastic tarps bearing the insignia and name of the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) have replaced glass in most windows. Some buildings have been hit directly by larger shells and, completely gutted, stand as gaping husks of shopping centers and banks, rubble piled neatly at their corners. Dogs loiter and nip at the edges of trash heaps, which burn openly on less crowded streets.

But on this quiet Sunday, among the ruined buildings and lives, a palpable urgency for normality is in the atmosphere. Behind the unfocused eyes there is a determination not to leave this city or abandon the

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multiethnic ideals that it stands for and that Bosnia once stood for as well. Scattered crews are taking down UNHCR tarp and replacing the glass in many windows. Sidewalks are being swept. Shops and cafés are open. Trams are running on a limited circuit around the downtown area. Even the Sarajevsko brewery continues to make beer. And here and there, people are sitting and drinking beer, coffee, and soda. In the Bazaar two Bosnian Government soldiers in camouflage and tennis shoes stop for an ice cream.

At a Catholic church, painters are readying the building for the Pope. The building is nearly untouched by the war, except for neglect of upkeep; while down the street at the main Mosque, scaffolding had to be erected to hold the building up. Today, despite the fact that the Mosque has repeatedly been targeted by the Serbs, some worshippers have to pray in the doorways because it is so crowded inside. It is not difficult to imagine what they, kneeling outside on the hard concrete facing Mecca, are praying for.

After a drink in a café in the old town square, we wander down to the riverside to see the spot where the Serbian nationalist, Prinicip, stood when he gunned down Archduke Francis Ferdinand in 1914. The slab of concrete bearing his footprints has been removed from the sidewalk for safety. Now, during the war, leaving a dirty square absence. Down the block we come to the astonishing shell of Bosnia’s once-magnificent National Library. Formerly the repository of Muslim culture in Yugoslavia, the Library building now stands open to the sky, four stories above, its interior cluttered with a huge pile of broken masonry and collapsed arches. Like the Mosques of Bosnia, this building too has been one of the Serbs’ favorite targets.

The story of Bosnia can be read in the contrast between the Mosques and the Muslim Library on one hand and the Churches on the other. From their deliberate targeting of the Library to the destruction of hundreds of Mosques, the Serbs have not only tried to drive the Muslims out, they have also tried to wipe out all traces of their culture, not just in Sarajevo, but all over Bosnia. Serbs routinely and systematically bulldoze destroyed mosques, dig up their foundations, remove every last bit of the building form the site, and level the ground it once stood on. The Bosnian Government, on the other hand, is fighting to preserve what Bosnia once was: “a country of tolerant nations and religions,” in Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic’s words. The Churches and Synagogues in Government-held territory, like the one being painted in Sarajevo, have not been subjected to Government aggression. In many places, especially in Sarajevo and in Tuzla (one of the UN-declared safe areas in the north of the country), Serbs, Croats, Jews, as well as Muslims are the besieged inhabitants Karadzic and his army are fighting. While the Bosnian Serbs are fighting for an all-Muslim state, the Bosnian Government is not fighting for an all-Muslim country; rather, they are fighting for the ideal of tolerance — protection of minority rights — and against the tyranny of the majority.

And in this battle, culture matters. Hitler deliberately preserved artifacts of Jewish culture for a museum in Prague that he planned would show the decadence of the Jews and justify his final solution. The Bosnian Serbs, however, in their fever of ethnonationalism justify the removal of the Muslims from Bosnia by expanding all evidence of the culture and history of these people in this area. By destroying the markers of Muslim culture, the logic goes, the Serbs have proven that the Muslim people have no claim to the land, that the land is purely Serb. The Bosnian Government is fighting against this notion of racial and ethnic and cultural purity. The conflict cannot simply be chalked up to the “ancient hatreds” we hear so much about. Rather, it must be seen in the context of a struggle between the ideals of tolerance and purity, between multiethnic states and ethnonationalism, between multiculturalism and the tyranny of the majority. And it is a struggle that is faced not only by Bosnians and Serbs and Croats, but by Americans too.

After our tour of Sarajevo’s “sights,” I run across the tarmac at the dangerous exposed airport wearing a powder blue helmet and flak jacket, lucky to be able to leave this place so easily. As the Russian plane climbs steeply over the Serb heavy weapons on the mountain tops around the city and on towards UN headquarters in Zagreb, Croatia, I feel relief and guilt at my safe escape. Then I look along the benches lining the cargo bay of the plane at the mostly French soldiers who will likely be returning to Sarajevo soon. Away from the alertness and awe generated by a city under siege and isolated by the roar of the engines, I feel emotional for the first time. I am enveloped by a great sadness for the people of Sarajevo, for the young soldiers from so many parts of the world who are living under such danger, and for us. Because, as I fly out over the Adriatic, I find myself thinking that I too live in a place where tolerance is under attack. I wonder if I have glimpsed in Sarajevo the return of the tyranny of the majority as an ideal.
“Bigger Thomas at the Movies”

Like many critics today, Richard Wright often took the act of reception of mass culture—most usually, the act of film spectatorship—to typify the condition of subjectivity in the modern world. Thus among many scenes of radio-listening, newspaper-reading, and movie-going in his writings—in such works as Lawd Today!, “The Man Who Lived Underground,” and Native Son—Bigger Thomas’s attendance at a movie theater in the latter novel is notable for its dramatization of a charged encounter between a socially dislocated black youth and a starkly racist product of the Hollywood film industry (i.e. Trader Horn, 1931). In that scene, Wright credits Bigger with at least a nascent critical resistance to the movie’s blatant derogation of Africans. As he depicts Bigger’s mostly inattentive act of spectatorship, a whiteness and its narrative is in effect reconfigured by and for Bigger’s eyes to make it answer more productively to his needs and desires. In the present paper, this scene of Bigger at the movies is compared to a more or less symmetrical scene in Black Power, in which a movie audience in Accra watches an unidentified American cowboy movie. Wright frequently met young Africans during his trip to the Gold Coast in 1953 whose minds had regrettably been colonized (as he thought) by Hollywood movie culture; but he doesn’t tend to credit them with much critical resistance to American mass culture’s warped representations.

There are both differences and similarities between the scenes of movie-going in Native Son and Black Power, but in both texts the terms in which Wright thinks about film spectatorship, juvenile delinquency, and critical resistance seem to have been borrowed from the work of the Chicago School of sociologists of the 1930s, and perhaps more specifically from the Payne Fund Studies of Motions Pictures and Youth of the same period. These studies were concerned with young people in urban America whose deracination, as the sociologists saw it, both led them to and was encouraged by the movies. As urban sociologists like Herbert Blumer saw it, the movie theater was a space in which young people became dangerously alienated from local traditional cultures, but at the same time it was a place in which they could become oriented beneficially toward a wider public sphere. The danger or benefit appears for Wright to hinge specifically on whether such film viewers are competent in understanding the formal conventions of filmic narrative. These are the issues that Wright explored with subtlety in both Native Son and Black Power.

Christopher Looby
University of Chicago

“Richard Wright as Ethnographer: The Conundrums of Pagan Spain”

When Richard Wright’s meditation on Spanish life and culture was published in 1957, everyone—including Wright and his publisher—expected it to be controversial. As Richard Strout, one of the early reviewers aptly put it, “There are so many ways of misunderstanding this vivid book of travel journalism that it is likely to kick up a controversy—a Negro writing about whites, a man of Protestant background appalled by the degradation of a quasi-Church-state, an expatriate drawing upon his native land for occasional comparisons, an ex-radical describing Franco’s Falange.”

This essay investigates the various conundrums suggested by Strout’s remarks, focusing on the ethnographic aspects of Wright’s reading of Spanish culture. Wright is compared to Zora Neale Hurston, his usual adversary, whose training in anthropology equipped her to observe and interpret cultures, and not only her own; her book Tell My Horse, like Pagan Spain, limns the contours of foreign cultures. Wright had had extensive contact with professional interpreters of culture, the sociologists of the “Chicago School,” such as Robert Park, William Issac Thomas, Ernest Burgess, and Louis Wirth. The latter two used realist and proletarian literature to illustrate sociological principles. Wright shared their interest in using scholarly research for didactic purposes in his fiction, and had no difficulty extending this approach to the kind of writing he proposed to do in Spain.

At the same time, the book definitely still fits certain parameters of travel writing, and my essay links Wright to that tradition and its curious history, which often has intertwined with ethnography. My speculations employ the recent work of Mary Louise Pratt and William W. Stowe, who investigate the ideological and even imperial aspects of such writing in the European tradition, which Wright, after all, he is heir to, although in certain respects he appears to be confronting it. This latter claim is investigated here through a brief digest of ethnographic aspects of Wright’s preceding fiction, and the techniques of two books that precede Pagan Spain, Black Power and The Color Curtain. Finally, the essay situates Wright’s unusual project with the discourse recently mounted on “Writing Cultures” by James Clifford and others.

John Lowe
Louisiana State University
Announcement

Society for the Study of Southern Literature

Founded in 1968, the Society for the Study of Southern Literature organizes lively and provocative panels for meetings sponsored by the Modern Language Association, the South Central Modern Language Association, and the American Literature Association. Topics for recent panels at MLA have included "Southern Literary History/ Histories," "Race, Gender, and Humor in Southern Literature," and "Old Wine in New Bottles: Josephine Humphreys."

SSSL publications include the 1985 volume *The History of Southern Literature*, and the SSSL Newsletter, which is issued semiannually and features an extensive bibliography on southern studies.

Any person, educational institution, or library interested in SSSL may join. Membership includes the Newsletter and bibliography. Annual dues are $4.50, U.S. residents, and $5.00, non-U.S. residents ($9.00 and $10.00 for two-year memberships). To join, send checks or money orders payable to SSSL to:

David Estes
Secretary-Treasurer, SSSL
English Department, Box 50
Loyola University
New Orleans, LA 70118

Remember PBS Premiere of Richard Wright—Black Boy on September 4!

Renewal Notice

As you receive this issue of the Richard Wright Newsletter, we want to remind you that it is time to renew your membership in the Richard Wright Circle. The yearly $10 membership fee runs for one calendar year and entitles you to two issues of the Newsletter: spring/summer and fall/winter. In order to receive the next issue, you need to fill out and send us the form on the back page (to insure that we have your latest address) along with a $10 check or money order. Please remember that your membership dues still constitute the primary funding for the Circle and Newsletter; without them, the Circle cannot continue to function or to publish the Newsletter. Your cooperation in helping us to maintain the Circle and Newsletter is greatly appreciated.

Two-year memberships are strongly encouraged
Join/renew now and save later!
### Richard Wright Circle Membership

For a one year membership to the *Richard Wright Circle*, send the information below and a $10 check or money order to Maryemma Graham, Northeastern University, 406 Holmes Hall, Boston, MA 02115; (617) 373-4549; Fax (617) 373-2509; E-mail rwc@lynx.neu.edu

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