

Richard Wright Newsletter

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Richard Wright Reviews

Richard Wright and Racial Discourse

BY DR. ROBERT BUTLER
CANISIUS COLLEGE

Richard Wright and Racial Discourse

by Yoshinobu Hakutani
University of Missouri Press,
1996
312 p, \$34.95

Examining Wright's work very broadly as "racial discourse" which is "the product of diverse cultures," this book performs an extremely important service for Wright's scholars. First of all, it offers richly nuanced readings of critically neglected books such as *Lawd Today*, *Pagan Spain*, and *The Long Dream*, rescuing them from the oversimplified interpretations they have generally received and integrating them with Wright's work as a whole. Moreover, Hakutani's book provides a coherent, balanced, and sensitive analysis of Wright's development as an artist and thinker from his apprentice work in the 1930s to the haiku poetry he wrote late in his career. Throughout this careful study Hakutani remains faithful to the complexities of Wright's genuinely "multicultural" and "cross cultural" vision of life.

Hakutani's considerable skills as a comparatist are powerfully displayed throughout the book. He points out that Wright drew upon a wide variety of literary and cultural traditions throughout his career but stresses that Wright's grasp of these traditions was always active, never passive; that is, he re-shaped what he had learned from other writers with his own unique voice and experience as an African American writer. Hakutani, for example, does an excellent job of explaining how *Uncle Tom's Children* grew out of the tradition of American naturalism but emphasized that the book also transcended

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the limits of naturalistic stories like Dreiser's "Nigger Jeff." In the same way, *Native Son* is compared with Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*, Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, and Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* but is finally seen as quite distinct from them, both in technique and vision. *The Outsider* is set alongside Camus's *The Stranger*, but its points of contrast are more significant than its points of comparison. And Wright's sustained interest in Zen Buddhism is clearly shown in Hakutani's wonderfully

(con't. page 6)

From the Editors

Five years have now gone by since the first issue of the *Richard Wright Newsletter*, and the Richard Wright Circle has witnessed many significant developments in Literary Studies and African American literature in particular. No longer marginalized, black writing and black writers in America have become the subject of extensive public debate and dialogue as they have taken the lead in securing a place for multiethnic and multicultural literatures in both the college and secondary school curricula. With one Nobel Prize and three Pulitzer Prizes in literature to African Americans, we have begun to look at the whole of American culture differently. In this sense, Richard Wright is more alive than ever, for it was his intention for those who read his works to see America differently. We cannot help but to think, however, were Wright yet alive, he would want to see those differences reflected in the material conditions--the everyday lives of all people--as much as anywhere else. In other words, does the respect now accorded African American literature necessarily imply that increased access and opportunity is accorded African Americans and others historically underrepresented and disadvantaged? Can we truly admit to a more equi-

table and just society? We would all agree that there is still work to do on this front.

For those of us whose lives are spent in the classrooms of America and the world, however, how knowledge is codified, presented, and taught will always be our main battlefield, one from which we cannot retreat. It is here where we think that the Richard Wright Circle can make a difference. At this five year mark, therefore, our call is for more information on the global reception of Wright. We began last issue with a series of responses to reading Richard Wright. In this issue, we highlight the teaching of Richard Wright in both Turkey and New York City. In each forthcoming issue, we hope to expand this pedagogical emphasis in meaningful ways. We hope to map a kind of reading/teaching phenomenon that values Wright's texts across a wide range of curricular offerings from African American and multi-ethnic to American and world literature courses.

Meanwhile, it is not too soon to begin thinking about the Wright Centenary (2008). We invite you to share your ideas with us in print and electronically. We hope you enjoy this five year celebration in print!!

*Maryemma Graham
Jerry W. Ward, Jr.*

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The editors welcome all news relevant to the life and work of Richard Wright. The Richard Wright Circle is supported by the departments of African American Studies and English at Northeastern University.

News From Natchez:

TWO WRITERS WIN '96 RICHARD WRIGHT LITERARY AWARDS

Reprinted from the Natchez Literary Celebration newsletter.

Mississippi writers Ellen Douglas and Willie Morris have been named winners of the third annual Richard Wright Literary Excellence Award, a prestigious prize named after the late Natchez native whose books *Native Son* and *Black Boy* were phenomenal successes when published in the 1940s.

Douglas, winner for fiction, and Morris, for nonfiction, received their awards June 1 at 7:30 p.m. at Natchez City Auditorium.

"These two outstanding Mississippians are highly regarded for their decades of literary achievements," said former University of Mississippi history professor David Sansing, chairman of the committee selecting the Wright award winners.

"With the wealth of nominations received this year, the committee agreed to create two categories so that both of these popular writers could be honored," Sansing said. "That decision will set our pattern for the future, with prizes going to fiction and non-fiction winners."

The awards are made not for a specific work but for a body of work, Sansing said. "These writ-

ers are known internationally for what they have achieved thus far in their lifetimes."

A bonus for the selection committee this year was having a winner who is a Natchez native. Ellen Douglas is the pen name used by Josephine Ayres Haxton, whose family roots are deep in the hometown she shares with Wright.

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"Ms. Haxton's Natchez connection had no bearing on our selection, but it is a pleasant occurrence to have someone of her background to get this award," Sansing said.

Douglas' books and stories often feature fictitious Mississippi

towns of Homochitto and Philippi. Among her best known novels are *A Family's Affair*, winner of a Houghton Mifflin fellowship; *Apostles of Light*, which was nominated for a National Book Award; *The Rock Cried Out*; and *Can't Quit You, Baby*.

Douglas has taught as a writer-in-residence at Northeast Louisiana University and at the University of Virginia. She recently retired as writer-in-residence at the University of Mississippi.

Morris, born in Jackson, grew up in Yazoo City. Following graduation from the University of Texas in 1956, he received a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University, England. In 1963 he was employed by Harper's magazine in New York City. Four years later, at age 32, he became the editor-in-chief of the magazine.

Among Morris' most popular works are the books *North Toward Home*, which the London Times described as "the finest evocation of a Southern-American boyhood since Mark Twain"; *The Last of the Southern Girls*; *The Courtship of Marcus Dupree*, which won the Christopher Medal in 1983; *New York Days*; and *My Dog Skip*, recently released in paperback.

Teaching Richard Wright . . .

. . . in Ankara, Turkey

BY DR. LALE DEMIRTURK
BILKENT UNIVERSITY, ANKARA

Teaching Richard Wright's *Native Son* (NS) to junior students in Turkey has been a highly challenging experience, for we have only one specific African-American Literature course in which they have to learn much of the racial stereotypes and the literary background, by studying four novels. In this course that I taught a few years ago, we studied R. Ellison's *Invisible Man*, E. Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss J. Pittman*, and J. Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, in addition to *Native Son*. I started the class discussions by asking specific questions that I hoped would lead to understanding Bigger Thomas' lot. The first perceptions of the students began to change as we journeyed through the "friendly" attitudes of Mary and Jan leading finally to the murder scene. My students had a hard time in getting through the cross-cultural barriers, for which I tried to help much later because I did not want to lecture on summing up the traditional critical responses to Wright's works and Bigger's character. The main problem was the students' failure to accept that Bigger was forced into this situation, and that if he had lived in a different country,

he might not have become a "potential murderer." So we kept exchanging examples from different cultural contexts, and they realized what Britten and the Press failed to--the problematic of coming to terms with one's self-image, when you are continuously being located within the representational racist paradigm. In the trial scenes, when Bigger starts opening up his inner world to Max, I believe my students had a clearer sight of Bigger than Max

I guess that was when they realized that Bigger's situation was not just "fictional" it was the reality itself. Then our discussions of Wright's literary technique and Bigger's psychological make-up became meaningful enough to enable us to move towards a deeper level of perception.

himself. For the first time in class the students gave up calling Bigger names such as **racist/murderer**, when we looked at one "news" sample on R. Nixon in *The Chicago Sunday Tribune*. I guess that was when they realized that Bigger's situation was not

just "fictional." It was the reality itself. Then our discussions of Wright's literary technique and Bigger's psychological make-up became meaningful enough to enable us to move towards a deeper level of perception. The students and I realized that even though it was impossible to identify with Bigger by any means, for we Turks belonged to a totally different part of the world and therefore we were oppressed under different representational paradigms, we needed to show the courage to admit that the domination of the white image over the humiliation of the black (or of the Third World) image defines the basic power relationship between the sign systems of the oppressor and the oppressed. Hence we have to analyze why and how people such as Bigger are so-called-criminals, murderers, angry and violent people. In order to do that we need to be AWARE of and fight with the power of images that we are cornered by. I gave much simpler examples of how that would make them feel if each one of them was labeled by me, the teacher who represents the authority, as lazy fools, rather than [my] taking them as individuals who might have done quite badly on some of the exam questions. I am not sure whether this has worked successfully enough for students to accept Bigger as an individual rather than remembering him by the

racist cultural labels which destroyed Robert Nixon himself. But at least they have realized, I believe, that the image of the oppressed is constantly controlled and manipulated by the image of the oppressor, and hence the "rhetoric and the imagery of domination and humiliation"¹ manipulate the perceptions of the oppressed by the oppressor. In this context the students and I had a common ground in sharing Michel Fabre's view that Bigger could now be seen as a black man who "reduce[s] the Whites to stereotypes."² Bigger has achieved to treat the White image as the Other, which neither Max nor Jan could fully understand, and in doing so he redefined the logic of center and periphery in personal terms in an attempt to alleviate his marginal role in the oppressive definitional framework. This process of shifting the cultural paradigms as the Other is what we need to learn in the Third World in order to see the power of the racist myths in overtaking the reality and reducing us to nothingness. I am happy to see that the class discussions have led the students and I to re-positioning ourselves in relation to Bigger, his plight and the reality out there.



¹Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, trans. Jan N. Pieterse (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 223.

²Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*. Trans. Isabel Barzun (1973; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 183.



Dr. Demirturk is an Associate Professor in the Department of American Culture and Literature at Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey.



... and in New York City

BY TED NELLEN

Richard Wright's "The Fight" is a short story I teach to ninth graders in a public high school in New York City. I like using this story early in the school year with my students because so many of them are in the same situation as Richard was in this story. Richard was taken to a new school by his uncle. The new kid, Richard, was challenged by his new classmates and he had to come to terms with his new environment by standing up for himself.

Our ninth graders are an ideal audience for this story because they, too, are new to our school. The story explained young Richard's thought process and showed his actions as he worked through the process of becoming accepted in his new school. Richard's solutions were logical, ingenious, and lucky. The essential power of the story was that Richard never does fight. The story becomes a perfect segue for us as we are able to hear many possible solutions from our students. Because our school is in New York City, the violent scenarios I hear are reflective of their environment, but are not appropriate for our society. They speak from what they know. Some of them speak about how they would go home and get "their boys" and return to "mess up the sucka." Others offer a solution of return

(con't.)

Since the natural inclination for most of our students is to fight instead of negotiate to solve a problem, it comes as a surprise when they realize Richard did not fight.

ing to school with weapons of many types to "Blow the motha away." "No one dises me and gets away with it" remark many. They are all tough guys ready to defend themselves with the only tools they know. What is so very ironic is that most of the students do not see that Richard never fights.

The hooting and hollering that went on during the reading and discussion demonstrated the violent times we live in and our kids must grow up in. It is very sad watching and listening to these young boys and girls acting like "bad" adults. The truth of the matter is that all of them, with the exception of maybe one, would not behave as they speak. It is unfortunately all they know.

However the most powerful aspect of this story is how it allows me to introduce Conflict Resolution. Conflict Resolution is a very important and highly supported program in our school. It is a major program that is run and supported by our students. Since the natural inclination for most of our students is to fight instead of negotiate to solve a problem, it comes as a surprise when they realize Richard did not fight. As the discussion continues around this idea of negotiation, some of the more boisterous students concede that Richard's solution is better than their own and that a non-violent path would be preferable. But they always add that they have to "save face" somehow. They

do not want to "look soft." As a result our Conflict Resolution classes and program gain immediate support from the newest members of our school. This program allows for them to be heard, to be part of the solution, and to save face without losing face or a life.

Richard Wright's voice and character in "The Fight" is a sane voice and character in the milieu we call New York City.



Ted Nellen is an English teacher in a New York Public high school with 22 years of experience in both public and private schools. He now uses the Internet to teach CyberEnglish.

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Quotations from "The Fight" are excerpted from Insights: Themes in Literature. 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979. 509-511.



R. Wright and Racial Discourse
(con't. from page 1)

detailed analysis of "The Man Who Lived Underground" but it is stressed that Wright transformed traditional understandings of Zen Buddhism in order to express a uniquely African American vision of life.

An especially important feature of this book is the careful attention it pays to the non-fiction "travel books" which Wright published in the 1950s, *Black Power*, *The Color Curtain*, and *Pagan Spain*. These books, which have been largely ignored by critics and cultural historians, are not only valuable on their own merits but also for the light they shed on Wright's later career when his outlook became increasingly more global and multicultural. Hakutani keenly assesses each book and links them to Wright's better-known books. He makes a convincing argument that *Black Power* grows naturally out of seeds implanted in *The Outsider* and also draws important parallels between Wright's responses to the social world depicted in *Pagan Spain* and the social world described in *Black Boy* and *Uncle Tom's Children*.

Richard Wright and Racial Discourse makes a very strong contribution to our understanding of Wright's work and will be of great interest to specialists and generalists alike.

ALA 1996

SESSION 70: Richard Wright and Theoretical Illumination.

*Abstracts from the conference session sponsored by
the Richard Wright Circle and The Society for the Study of Southern Literature.*

Jerry W. Ward, Jr., University of Memphis, Chair.

“Decentering the Subjects:
Body and Soul in Richard
Wright’s *Savage Holiday*.”

J. LEE GREENE
University of North Carolina,
Chapel Hill

Although *Savage Holiday* is usually read as Wright’s “raceless” novel, a reading that deconstructs Freudian theory as an instrument of cultural marking illuminates how Wright unmasks the white subject as savage. Such a reading exposes an inverse relationship between subject formation and culture formation. It also reveals Wright’s artistry in creating Erskine Fowler, in the words of Alessandro Portelli, as the savage who “stands for a space in the margins of ‘civilization.’” *Savage Holiday* is indeed a novel that centers “race.”

“Art and Party Politics: A
Search for Synthesis in *Uncle
Tom’s Children*.”

MARK A. SANDERS
Emory University

Wright’s first major publication, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, presents a highly conflicted text, one attempting to wed the practical application of Marxist doctrine with the expansive possibilities of literary art. In its adherence to John Reed Club doctrine, the collection advances and celebrates Marxist ideology. Yet, attention to thematic and symbolic tensions shows that Wright’s pursuit of literary art destabilizes and ultimately dismantles the overt vision of Marxist dialectics. The collection unwillingly signifies on dogma (both naturalistic and Marxist) and seeks to privilege an artistic vision free of limitations. This ongoing tension between positivist progression and artistic complexity anticipates Wright’s formal break with the Communist Party and his self-conscious pursuit of artistic autonomy.

“Haunted by Innocence: The
Debate with Dostoevsky in
Wright’s ‘Other’ Novel, *The
Outsider*.”

MICHAEL F. LYNCH
Kent State University-Trumbull

In *The Outsider*, Wright successfully resolves the ideological conflicts of *Native Son* and achieves a sophisticated exploration of philosophical ideas and a narrative of sustained tension. Wright models several aspects of his novel on Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, but he extends Dostoevsky’s analysis of the effect of atheism on the modern world and challenges Dostoevsky’s thesis of the criminal haunted by guilt. Wright’s protagonist is the “ethical criminal,” who must assert ultimate self-will to achieve his identity and freedom but who finds himself stranded in a private world without any shared values or the possibility of love. The originality and force of Wright’s approach lie in his depiction of the murderer who never discovers any limit to his “right” to any action but who nonetheless becomes horrified not at his guilt but at his very innocence.

RWC MINUTES from the AMERICAN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION

May 31, 1996

The business meeting of the Richard Wright Circle at the American Literature Association Conference (San Diego, May 30-June 2, 1996) was called to order by Jerry Ward at 8:00 a.m. on Friday, May 31. Members present were: Mary Kemp Davis (Meredith College), Donald Gibson (Rutgers University), Alfonso Hawkins (Florida International University), Yoshinobu Hakutani (Kent State University), Mark A. Sanders (Emory), and Virginia Whatley Smith (University of Alabama-Birmingham).

Ward asked for volunteers to organize the panel for CLA, and Yoshinobu Hakutani will organize the session for ALA.

Members discussed the need for more submissions to the *Richard Wright Newsletter*. Among the topics they considered were Wright's life in relation to current work in biography and autobiography, the interpretation of Wright's works in film and television, and responses to Wright from students and prisoners. One call for articles has been posted on the Internet at "NCTE-TALK" and

another appeared in *RWN*, Spring 1996. Members agreed that more attention should be given to how Wright is taught in this country and abroad. Ward congratulated Hakutani on the recent publication of his book *Richard Wright and Racial Discourse* (University of Missouri Press, 1996). Professor Whatley Smith gave a brief report on the status of the volume she is editing on Wright's travel books. The meeting adjourned at 8:55 a.m.

RWC NOTES from the COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION

BY DR. ROBERT BUTLER

The Richard Wright Circle sponsored a panel entitled "Richard Wright's *Rite of Passage*: A Recovered Masterpiece" at the College Language Association's annual convention held in Winston-Salem, North Carolina from April 10-13. The panel was chaired by Robert Butler of Canisius College and featured papers by Jerry W. Ward, Jr. of The University of Memphis and

Tougaloo College, Adnee Bradford of Winston-Salem State University, and Onita Estes-Hicks of SUNY College at Old Westbury.

Professor Ward's paper, "Wright's Prophetic Vision: *Rite of Passage* as a Future Sign," explored Wright's novella as a troubled prediction of the breakdown of urban society in America resulting in a state of crisis for African American youth. Professor Bradford's paper, "The

Pedagogical Implications of *Rite of Passage*," focused on her ongoing research into the teaching of Wright's work in middle schools. Professor Estes-Hicks's paper, "Richard Wright's *Rite of Passage* as a Reflection of Current Social Problems," examined Wright's book as an analysis of forces in American life which have led to the current state of crisis in our cities.

Renewal Notice

As you receive this issue of the *Richard Wright Newsletter*, we want to remind you that if you did not renew your membership in the Richard Wright Circle after receiving the Spring/Summer 1996 issue, now is the time for renewal. 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 and continue your membership, you need to fill out and send us the form below (to insure that we have your latest address) along with a \$10 check or money order made out to the Richard Wright Circle. Please remember that your membership dues still constitute the primary funding for the Circle and *Newsletter*. Your cooperation in helping us to maintain the Circle and *Newsletter* is greatly appreciated.

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