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**RICHARD WRIGHT  
COLLECTION**

**The New York Public Library  
Schomburg Center for Research  
in Black Culture  
515 Malcolm X Boulevard  
New York, New York 10037**

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## Preface

This inventory is one of several prepared as part of the archival preservation program at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, one of the research units of Public Library.

The Schomburg Center's archival preservation program involves the organization and preservation of primary source material held by the Center and of significance to the study of the black experience. It furthermore includes the preparation of detailed inventories of these collections, making the information contained therein accessible as well as available to scholars.

The necessary staff and supplies for this program were made available through a combination of Library and government funds and private grants from foundations.

**RICHARD WRIGHT (1908-1960). COLLECTION, 1935-1967**  
**3 boxes and three bound volumes. (1 lin. ft.)**

**Biographical Sketch**

Born in 1908 near Natchez, Mississippi, of a family of sharecroppers, Richard Wright was a self-taught intellectual and literary figure whose work influenced an entire generation of black writers, from Ralph Ellison, Ann Petry and James Baldwin in the United States, to George Lamming and Camara Laye in the Caribbean and in Africa. He left the South for Chicago at the age of nineteen, driven by a hunger for learning kindled in part by the books he surreptitiously borrowed from a white-only library, and particularly by the works of H.L. Menken whose ability to use words as weapons impressed him. Wright had begun writing as early as 1924, but "the environment the South creates," he later wrote, was "too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings."

In Chicago, Wright held a succession of menial jobs: porter, busboy, day laborer, and substitute worker at the post office where he encountered the radical workers and intellectuals who would help radicalize his thinking and facilitate his writing career. In 1932 he joined the John Reed Club, a Communist Party organization for intellectuals and artists, and soon after, his poems began appearing in radical magazines and newspapers, including *Left Front* and *New Masses*. He formally joined the Party in 1933 and worked as a Communist organizer on college campuses in the midwest and as a reporter for the *Daily Worker*. "The Communist Party had been the only road out of the Black Belt of Chicago for me," he later wrote to a friend.

Chicago, during the Great Depression, was a hot bed of radicalism and social activism. It was also a time when black and white workers were organized together in the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and when black and white writers and artists discovered and influenced each other's work in the Work Progress Administration and in study circles and radical groups. The author joined the WPA Federal Writers' Project in 1935, and was also active in the South Side Writers' Group, a project of the National Negro Congress.

Wright developed his individual voice in the intellectual ferment of the 1930s. As a Marxist, he was reasonably acquainted with the literature of the worldwide socialist movement. It was the possibility of uniting the black experience, he later wrote, with "scattered but kindred people...in the realm of revolutionary experience" which drew him to the communist movement. He wanted to write about the lives of the black masses that the Communists sought to lead.

Communist Party orthodoxy disapproved, however, of Wright's naturalist prose, akin in

its depiction of powerlessness and grinding oppression to the nineteenth century French naturalists Zola and Balzac and the twentieth century American naturalists

Theodore Dreiser, Mencken, and others. His fiction downplayed the role of consciousness which, in the canon of socialist realism, is the transcending moment when the oppressed individual realizes his fate and becomes a conscious historical agent. His refusal to adhere to the Party's outlook in literature and art led to his expulsion from the Chicago Communist Party in 1937. He left Chicago for New York the same year, and was reinstated by the Party in New York. His first book, *Uncle Tom's Children*, a collection of short stories, was published in 1938. His most influential work, *Native Son*, was published the following year. He left the Communist Party in 1940, dissatisfied with the Party's abandonment of a militant platform against segregation during World War II. That break was not publicized, however, until publication of his two-part article, "I Tried to Be a Communist," in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1942.

Wright's next book, *Black Boy*, published in 1945 was on the bestseller list for the larger part of that year and was a selection for the Book-of-the-Month club. The royalties from its sale would provide him with a yearly income for the next twelve years. Also in 1945, he wrote an extensive introduction to St. Clair Drake's and Horace Cayton's *Black Metropolis*, and a pamphlet for the Wiltwick School on juvenile delinquency. He also lectured extensively and contributed articles to magazines like *Mademoiselle*, the *New Republic* and *Negro Digest*. Meanwhile, ostracized by former comrades and friends, denounced by Senator Bilbo as a liar, and disheartened by persistent discrimination in spite of his growing fame and success, the author spent part of the war years travelling in Mexico and Canada, before settling permanently in Paris in 1947. In an article, "I Choose Exile," commissioned by *Ebony* magazine in 1949, he wrote that he left the United States in a search for freedom, and that he had found that freedom in France.

In Paris, Wright's literary successes made him a celebrity and he found a home in the cultural and intellectual circles of the bohemian left. He withdrew into a comfortable silence of seven years while exploring the new expatriate environment framed by existentialism and the worldwide revolt against colonialism. His three expatriate novels, *The Outsider* (1953), *Savage Holiday* (1954) and *The Long Dream* (1958) explored existentialist themes, but were more successful in France than in the United States where they were criticized as out of touch with social conditions.

Meanwhile the author travelled extensively from his Parisian base: to Argentina in 1949, and to Haiti the following year, during the making of the movie version of *Native Son*, in which he played the lead role of Bigger Thomas; to the Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1953 for a book on colonial oppression and of personal discovery, *Black Power*; to Spain in 1954 for a travel book, *Pagan Spain*, exploring the themes of race and religion, politics and

tradition in the land of the conquistadors; and to Indonesia in 1955 for a report on the Afro-Asian conference in Bandung, *The Color Curtain*. Other major writings during that period include *White Man, Listen*, a series of lectures delivered at the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris in 1956, and an introduction to George Padmore's *Pan-Africanism or Communism* (1956). His last two books, *Lawd Today* (written in the 1930s) and *Eight Men* were published posthumously.

Richard Wright married Dhinah Meadman in 1939 and Ellen Poplar in 1941, and was the father of two children, Julia and Rachel. Horace Cayton, a close friend from the Chicago days, praised him as a prophetic writer. Of his self-imposed exile, Faith Berry, the Langston Hughes biographer, wrote that he was "chided, misunderstood, accused of abandoning America and its racial problems" and that he had died before any of his predictions could become true.

### **Scope and Content**

The Richard Wright Collection is composed of two primary groups of material. The first contains the corrected typescripts of his works *Native Son*, *The Long Dream*, and *Savage Holiday* (originally entitled *Monument to Memory*.) The second group is actually the research material gathered by Constance Webb Pearlstien, a close friend of Wright's and author of *Richard Wright, a biography by Constance Webb* (G.P. Putnam, 1968). This group contains copies of correspondence between Wright and a number of friends, members of his family, and business associates during the period 1939-1959. It includes typescripts of a number of Wright's articles and speeches which served as sources for Webb's work, comments by various people on various aspects of Wright's life and personality, and reactions to Webb's drafts of the biography, and, finally, the corrected typescript of the biography itself.

The Wright correspondence is arranged alphabetically, the typescripts by title - first books, and then the articles and speeches. The comments about Wright and other general documents follow the typescripts. Finally correspondence to Webb about various aspects of Wright's life and the biography appears along with the corrected typescript of the work itself.

Except for the typescripts, most of the material is not in original form, but consists of transcripts, carbons, and photographic copies.

Processed by S. Biddle, 1971.

Biographical Sketch prepared by A. Elizee, 1998.

**Provenance**

This collection of material by and relating to Richard Wright came to the Schomburg Collection in two phases. The original typescripts of his works *Native Son*, *Savage Holiday*, and *The Long Dream* were purchased on the commercial rare book and manuscript market in 1969. The same book and manuscript dealer later donated the original corrected typescript of Constance Webb's *Richard Wright, a biography...* along with her research notes and copies of some of the primary sources she had consulted. These include correspondence, speeches, photographs, and transcripts of interviews.

Container List

<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Reel</u>
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## RESEARCH MATERIAL

## Correspondence

1	a1	1	To Aswell, Edward, 1939-1946 (Photocopy)
	a2		To Davis, John A. and other members of the American Society of African Culture, May 1, 1959. re: "proposed trip to French Black Africa" (Typescript)
	a3		From Green, Paul. February 17, 1941 (Photocopy)
	a4		From "Aunt Margaret (Maggie)" October 18, 1950-June 9, 1952 To Reynolds, Paul R.
	a5		April 2, 1940 (Photocopy)
	a6		September 28, 1940 (Photocopy)
	a7		April 27, 1948 (Photocopy)
	a8		July 24, 1954 (Photocopy)
	a9		From Reynolds, Paul R. September 23, 1954 (Carbon)
	a10		Restricted - removed from microfilm copy at request of correspondent
	a11		To Swan, Oliver July 23, 1956 (Photocopy)
	a12		From Yermilov, Vladimir, December 27, 1942 (Telegram)

## TYPESCRIPTS

	b1		Books by Richard Wright <i>The Long Dream</i> (2nd Draft) Part One: "Daydreams and Nightdreams..."
	b2		Part Two: "Days and Nights"
	b3		Part Three: "Waking Dream"
	b4		<i>Monument to Memory</i> (Original Title of <i>Savage Holiday</i> ) Part One: "Anxiety"
	b5		Part Two: "Ambush"
	b6		Part Three: "Attack"

*Native Son*

2	b7	1	Book One: "Fear"
	b8		Book Two: "Flight"
	b9		Book Three: "Fate"

b10 Book Three: "Fate"

b11 "Native Son" Screenplay by Pierre  
Chenal and Richard Wright

TYPESCRIPTS

Articles, Speeches, Notes and other  
material by or relating to Richard  
Wright

c1 "Art and Action" - 10th Anniversary  
Issue of Twice a Year, 1948  
(Typescript)

c2 "Blueprint for Negro Literature"  
(second copy of original draft  
with corrections by Wright)

c3 "Biography of a Bolshevick" (Notes  
Wright took on Ross Poindexter and  
titled "Biography...")

c4 "Colin Wilson - The Age of  
Defeat - Points of Criticism"

c5 "Discrimination in America - Urban  
Misery in an American City -  
Juvenile Delinquency in  
Harlem," Twice a Year, Fall-  
Winter, 1946-1947 (Carbon)

c6 "Fancy Man" (Typescript)

c7 "Franco-American Fellowship" -  
Constitution and Rules,  
Correspondence, 1951. (Photocopy)

c8 "Freedom's Lonely Song" (Typescript:  
"Very rough draft")

c9 2 "Freedom West Africa," May 12,  
1959 (Typescript)

3 c10 2 "Maud" - Notes on unpublished  
novel - Also photographs of  
Wright's family. (Webb manuscript  
includes her notes on various  
other aspects of her research  
on Wright)

c11 "The Negro Intellectual in the  
United States Today"  
(Typescript and carbon copy of a  
speech by Richard Wright before a  
discussion group at the

- American Church in Paris, November, 1960)
- c12 *Pan-Africanism or Communism* by George Padmore - Wright's "Introduction" (Carbon)
- c13 2 Notes on "Personalism, 1935" (Original signed typescript)
- c14 "Roots and Branches" (Typescript)
- c15 Speech sent to Constance Webb
- c16 "There is Always Another Cafe" *The Paris KIOSK*, November 10, 1953
- c17 *Uncle Tom's Children* - "Preface" (Chicago, June 1936) (Photocopy)
- c18 Unidentified Typescript (1 page)
- c19 Harrington, Ollie "The last days of Richard Wright"
- c20 Wilson, Richard - Legal papers and legal correspondence (Photocopies)
- c21 Winslow, Herry F. "The life of the poor" - Review of Lawd Today [Wright, Julia?] HAIKU Poem on Richard Wright
- c22 Yerby, Frank - letter to Michel Fabre re: Richard Wright and the race problem as a theme. April 1, 1963 (Photocopy)

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- CONSTANCE WEBB RESEARCH MATERIAL
- d1 Collins, O.B. - Letters to Webb describing Richard Wright as a 9th grade pupil, January 18, 1967
- d2 Ellison, Ralph - Interview February 3, 1963 (Typescript)
- d3 Ellison, Ralph - Comments on Webb manuscript of biography (Photocopy)
- d4 Folsom, Franklin - Letter re: Ownership of Wright's house on Charles Street, May 22, 1967
- d5 Green, Paul - Letter recounting some of Wright's experiences in Chapel Hill, North Carolina
- d6 Wright, Ellen - Interview September 1963
- d7 *Richard Wright, a biography by Constance Webb* Introduction and Acknowledgements - Chapter VI

d8	Chapter VII - XV
d9	Chapter XVI - XX
d10	Chapter XXI - XXV
d11	Chapter XXVI - Bibliography

**SEPARATION RECORD**

The following items were removed from:

**Name of Collection/Papers** Richard Wright Collection

**Date received:** 1969

**Date transferred:** 1970s

The item(s) listed below have been sent to the division indicated, either to be retained or disposed of there. Any items that should receive special disposition are clearly marked.

**Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division:**

Taperecording "On Richard Wright" comments by Chester Himes, John A. Williams and others.