

American Literature Association
Richard Wright Society
May 23-26, 2024
The Palmer House Hilton, Chicago, IL

The Richard Wright Society invites proposals to participate in two sessions on Wright to take place at the 35th Annual American Literature Association Conference, May 23-26 in Chicago, IL.

Panel: Richard Wright's Chicago

Richard Wright's time in Chicago between 1927 and 1937 was one of the most productive of his literary career. It was in that "unreal city" (as he once described it) that he cut his teeth as a fiction writer, composing major works that included the novel *Lawd Today!* (published posthumously in 1963) and the volume of novellas *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938). It was in Chicago, too, that Wright found inspiration for and began work on what remains his most celebrated novel, *Native Son* (1940), and where he set the Northern half of his influential autobiography *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (1945/1977). The Chicago John Reed Club connected Wright with other aspiring writers and served as his gateway to revolutionary literature and the world of US Communism. He was also the main force behind the founding of the South Side Writers Group, and in his supervisory role for the Illinois unit of the Federal Writers' Project he wrote several social surveys that displayed both his interest in Black urban migration and his fascination with the prestigious Chicago School of Sociology.

Our panel invites examination of this critical period in Wright's life: its variegated contexts, literary significance, and continuing relevance to the understanding of urban phenomena today. How did Wright navigate the political, institutional, and interpersonal networks in which he inserted himself? What role did he play in what has come to be known as the Black Chicago Renaissance of the 1930s and 1940s? How did contemporaneous intellectual currents—including (but not limited to) Marxism, psychology, and urban sociology—influence Wright's representations of city life, Black migrants, and the prospect for radical social transformation? Where does Wright's Chicago-era work fit within the landscape of US literary urbanism? And how do Wright's depictions of Chicago in his work help to illuminate issues that remain central to the study of the city today—from crime and precarity to alienation and police brutality?

Roundtable: Between Wright and the World: A Conversation on His Relevance Today

In 1935, Richard Wright published a poem, “Between the World and Me,” that began his life-long literary and political engagement with the world and, specifically, a racist world that cut deep into the lives of people of color. Yet Wright also understood the lacerations of racism as inseparable from an oppressive, exploitative capitalist system that he and millions of others struggled against in the hopes of creating an egalitarian world. Wright did not accept a world reified according to race, racism, nation, and capital but, like others of his generation, worked to transform and transcend it. Toward those goals, Wright was a member of the Communist Party from 1932 until 1944, a period during which he wrote influential works including *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938/40), *Native Son* (1940), and *Black Boy* (1945). Following a public and bitter break from the CPUSA, Wright relocated to France in 1946, where he increasingly concentrated on issues surrounding inequity and oppression throughout the decolonizing world. In his non-fictional writings such as *Black Power* (1954), *The Color Curtain* (1956), and *White Man, Listen!* (1957), he confronted the effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism on African and Asian lives and in doing so, he did not hesitate to use a Marxist framework to analyze world events.

This panel will explore the continuing relevance of Wright as a global writer whose work continues to inspire and challenge us. We invite proposals that explore how Wright critically engaged our world and its multileveled forms of oppression and resistance. We welcome proposals that include (but are not limited to) Wright’s engagement throughout his life with racism and violence; exile and alienation; nationalism, internationalism, Existentialism, and fascism; imperialism and colonialism; mass- and counter-cultures; Communism and Marxism.

Abstracts of 250 words for either the roundtable or the panel should be submitted by January 21, 2024, to Joseph G. Ramsey at WrightSociety@gmail.com. Please include a short bio and indicate if you would require any audio/visual equipment.