

American Literature Association
May 20-23, 2026
Palmer House, Chicago, IL

The Richard Wright Society announces two sessions on Wright to take place at the 37th Annual American Literature Association Conference.

Rethinking Richard Wright's Depiction and Analysis of Gender and Sexuality

In her 1976 essay "Richard Wright's Women and Inequality," Sylvia Keady argued that Wright's depictions of women were "prejudiced and stereotyped," concluding that his fiction bore a "sexist bias." Yet Wright's own public interventions complicate this assessment. At the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in 1956, he was the sole delegate—among sixty-three representatives from twenty-nine nations—to condemn the absence of women on the platform and to insist that "Black men will not be free until their women are free." Wright also drafted an unpublished manuscript, *Black Hope*, in which he centered the experiences of Black women; as Barbara Foley observes, the text demonstrates Wright's sustained engagement with gender as a political, social, and economic formation intertwined with racism, capitalism, and fascism.

These tensions—between Wright's blind spots and his prescient critiques; between his representations of women and his calls for gendered liberation; between his depictions of masculinity and his evolving understanding of sexuality—invite renewed scholarly attention. Wright's work is deeply entangled with questions of homosociality, patriarchal power, queer possibility, and the psychic and political construction of Black masculinity. His writings also intersect with mid-century discourses on homosexuality, often in ways that illuminate the pressures of Cold War nationalism, anticolonial struggle, and the policing of gendered and sexual norms.

The Richard Wright Society invites proposals that explore Wright's contributions to gender studies, queer studies, and critical masculinity studies, and that consider how his insights and contradictions speak to our present moment. Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Rethinking gender and sexuality in Wright's early works—including *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son*, *Lawd Today!*, and *Black Boy/American Hunger*—and how these texts anticipate or complicate later debates
- Wright's Harlem journalism for the *Daily Worker* and his early attention to Black women as political protagonists, labor organizers, and community thinkers
- Archival approaches to Wright's unpublished or lesser-known writings on gender, sexuality, and embodiment
- Gender, sexuality, and fascism in Wright's political thought and literary imagination

- Wright's representations of Black women, including in *Black Hope* and other unpublished manuscripts
- Wright's engagement with homosexuality, homophobia, and queer-coded figures in his fiction and nonfiction
- Homosociality, male bonding, and the construction of Black masculinity in Wright's work
- Wright's participation in international intellectual networks and how gender shaped those affiliations
- The politics of publishing, censorship, and translation in shaping Wright's gendered and sexual discourses
- Wright's influence on feminist, queer, and masculinity studies within African American and postcolonial scholarship
- Comparative studies linking Wright to contemporaries writing on gender and sexuality across the African diaspora
- Travel writing—especially *Pagan Spain*—as a site for examining Wright's reflections on women's social position, religious constraint, and the comparative politics of gender
- Posthumous writings such as *Memories of My Grandmother* and their insights into matrilineal memory, domestic labor, and the gendered structures of Black family life
- The evolution of Wright's thinking on gender and sexuality across genres (fiction, reportage, autobiography, travelogue) and how these shifts illuminate his broader political imagination

Mapping Migrations and Migrant Struggles with Richard Wright

Richard Wright was deeply concerned with documenting, dramatizing, and analyzing the causes, effects, and implications of forced migration to new regions, cities, or countries, as people fled oppression and/or sought “the warmth of other suns.” Taking its title from those lines in Wright's memoir *Black Boy*, Isabel Wilkerson's award-winning 2010 study of Black migrants dubs Wright the “epic poet of the Great Migration.” Yet his contributions to illuminating the complexities of mass migration in his time and ours arguably remain neglected despite their continued relevance..

In “Big Boy Leaves Home,” the first story in his first published book, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), Wright dramatizes the backstory of Big Boy, a black Southern migrant bound for Chicago, depicting both the brutal Jim Crow rule that forces his sudden flight and the underground community support networks that allow him to escape racist terror. Decades later, Wright's final published narratives reflect on his *own* travel—trips he took by choice to witness and record massive social changes across the world—from Western Europe (*Pagan Spain*) to the Gold Coast of West Africa (*Black Power*) to East Asia (*The Color Curtain*).

Often labeled as an urban realist or “naturalist” dealing with the conditions of modern industrial cities and the human social and psychological effects they give rise to, Wright is just as concerned with the historical processes that bring people *to* the city in the first place. He further attends to the various ways that residual elements of rural life or ‘pre-modern’ culture persist in migrants’ newfound destinations, and to the radical openings and reactions created by what he sometimes called the “void” of modern dislocation.

In nonfiction works such as *12 Million Black Voices*, and *Black Boy/American Hunger*, as well as his neglected foreword to *Black Metropolis*, Wright traces the nexus of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ forces that drive people to move—often suddenly—from place to place. Similarly, he traces the protracted social and psychological effects of such dislocations in many of his ‘urban’ novels, from the posthumous *Lawd Today* and the best-selling *Native Son*, to his unpublished “Black Hope.”

The Richard Wright Society invites proposals for papers that explore Wright’s insights into the experiences, conditions, and ongoing struggles of migrating peoples, past and present. We also welcome explorations of Wright’s *own* lifelong migrations, across the Jim Crow South in his youth, from Mississippi to Memphis, Tennessee, and Helena and Elaine, Arkansas; from Memphis to Chicago; from Chicago to New York City; from the United States to France, as well as the several volumes of travel writing that he authored across the 1950s. For example, how did Wright’s own travels—both those chosen and those forced upon him—shape his life, thought, and work? How did his migrant experiences and observations help him express truths for today, in 2025-26, a historical moment characterized by intensifying global migrations, as well as nationalist reactionary anti-migrant politics?

Finally, we are interested in considerations of how Wright’s ‘migratory imagination’ can provide a productive frame to engage with his work, rethink traditional categories in literary studies, and analyze contemporary politics. How does rethinking Wright—and African American literature more generally—through the lens of the migrant experience and migration, provide an opportunity for comparative studies across conventional ‘ethnic,’ ‘racial,’ or ‘national’ literary-cultural lines?

Abstracts of 250 words for either session should be submitted by January 20, 2026, to WrightSociety@gmail.com. Please include a short bio and indicate if you would require any audio/visual equipment.