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Note From The Editor

The world lost Richard Wright fifty years ago on November 28, 1960, but there are no signs that he or his work are fading from memory. The worldwide celebrations of his centennial in 2008 attest that the scholarship on Wright's oeuvre is wide and deep, and it is growing apace. He is now recognized as not only one of the world's most forceful critics of the Twentieth Century's great problem–the problem of the color line–but also as an incisive analyst of the central contradictions of modernity more generally, a period in which Enlightenment-inspired movements for freedom and individual dignity continually struggle against the repressions of illiberal modernity, transnational capitalism, and theocratic domination. Wright's current critical stature notwithstanding, he was not, and is not, an easy writer. His work is demanding—personally, politically, aesthetically, and philosophically – and it is also frequently considered, for good and for ill, quite problematic. In some respects this is not surprising, considering how ambitious and far reaching Wright's work was, both in subject matter and form. These problems nevertheless demand our attention, and the essays included in this special issue all devote themselves in one way or another to addressing those issues that continue to unsettle, pique, and intrigue readers.

Rebecka Rutledge Fisher's essay "Symbolic Wrights: The Poetics of Being Underground" corrects the misperception that Wright privileged ideology at the expense of a carefully wrought and highly ethical poetics. Via a subtle and complex reading of his novella *The Man Who Lived Underground*, Rutledge Fisher examines what she deems a "characteristic element of Wright's poetics and a central metaphor in this story: the habitation of the chthonian world." "This fundamental metaphor of psychic and bodily descent," she argues, "is emblematic of the ways in which paradigmatic and archetypal tropes facilitate the text's demand for a new and better world. Wright's novella underscores the value he places upon the exactness and complexity of the image in narrative, as well as the relation between metaphorical images and the words used to convey them." Rutledge Fisher contends that "the tonal images and sedimented emotions of 'The Man Who Lived Underground' form a tropological stream of discourse in which the novella not only probes its own status as a work of art, but also demonstrates the ways in which Wright's theory and practice of metaphor touch on and contribute to broader philosophical issues of the historicity of black being, the liminality of black existence, and the crises of social belonging." Rutledge Fisher frames her reading by locating Wright in a clearly established tradition of African American poetics that

Wright himself, somewhat problematically, implicitly disavowed in his well known manifesto "Blueprint for Negro Writing."

Barbara Foley's essay "A Dramatic Picture . . . Woman from Feudalism to Fascism:" Richard Wright's "Black Hope" brings unprecedented focus to a text that challenges easy assumptions about Wright's treatment of women in his writing. Foley reveals how "Black Hope" demonstrates–to a greater extent than any other work in his archive–Wright's serious concern about the position of African American women in capitalist society. Foley explains that this work was started right after he completed work on *Native Son*, and that it exists in "two distinct and quite different drafts–focus[ing] on the situations of two women–one middle-class, one working-class–in New York in the late 1930s. Based upon Wright's extensive research into the conditions facing female domestic laborers; one version is a hard-boiled proletarian novel full of melodrama and violence, the other version treats the alienation of an ambitious woman denied legitimate avenues of self-realization. The novel's complex political discourse links the situation of Depression-era black women not only with the political economy of capitalism but also with the threat of growing fascism. Despite its confusing and unfinished status as a two-versioned text, Black Hope shows Wright absorbed not only by Marxism but also by feminism, shedding new light on one of the past century's most important revolutionary writers."

Wright's next novel, *The Outsider* (1953), has been faulted by many readers for being overburdened by philosophical "ideas" and for being "pulpy" in its putatively melodramatic excess of violence. Rachel Watson argues, however, that attention to Wright's investment in the popular genre of crime fiction and in contemporary theories of detection reveals an important but previously overlooked dimension of speculation in the work. Watson's essay "posits two competing stories of a criminal trail–comprised of motive evidence on the one hand and forensic evidence on the other–in order to tell a story about reconciling racial identification with a revised humanism so that each may be oriented toward liberation." Watson argues further that "concurrent cultural narratives regarding forensic science–circulated mainly by the FBI–inadvertently advertised the universalizing quality of forensic identification, and thereby played a key role in how Wright chose to structure this politically and philosophically dense crime novel, and in the novel's ultimate cautionary critique of the burgeoning civil rights era. Such an analysis challenges not only how *The Outsider* tends to be read, but also the way we assess the cultural history of crime science; both of which emerge from this critique as more ambivalent than previously thought."

Wright's controversial Gold Coast travel narrative *Black Power* (1954) has been roundly criticized for its apparently Western blind spots and biases. Mikko Tuhkanen's essay "'Mankind's Queerest Laboratory": Richard Wright and the Speed of Decolonization" asks readers to take another look and to consider Wright's work "as a little-utilized source in postcolonial theory. In his delineations of diasporic modernity and postcolonial futurities, Wright proposes a theory of time and becoming that counters the temporal schemas of Western modernity, whose progressivist narratives have often figured non-Western cultures in terms of belatedness and arrested development." Tuhkanen's essay suggests that in *Black Power* and the essays collected in *White Man, Listen!* "Wright conceptualizes decolonization and modernity in terms of nondialectical temporalities. Delineating what one might call speeds of postcolonial becoming, he seeks to think the processes of decolonization in terms of 'incompossible speeds,' of singular velocities of becoming. For Wright, Africa figures as "mankind's queerest laboratory," a place of experimentation with different temporalities and speeds that may

precipitate unforeseeable postcolonial futures."

Alice Mikal Craven's essay "Richard Wright's 'Island' of Silence in *The Long Dream*" broaches persistent questions regarding what some consider Wright's curious silence on certain political issues at the end of his life by examining *The Long Dream*'s protagonist, Fishbelly's, silence or lack thereof, as a key to the aesthetic dimensions of *The Long Dream* trilogy. Through an analysis of *The Long Dream*, as well as his unpublished manuscript "Island of Hallucination," Craven argues that "Richard Wright's emergent transnational voice can be found paradoxically in learning to be silent."

In Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s brief but expansive essay, "Race, Displacement, and Richard Wright's Transatlantic Real Estate," he removes Wright's master work of urban blight from the limits of Chicago-School sociology to reveal its tragically prophetic vision. Although the essay touches on several of Wright's works, Baker focuses principally on *Native Son*'s depiction of Chicago's Black Belt as a modern, urbanized instantiation of the slave ship's "festering hold," and thus evidence of the enduring traumas of what Baker calls "Transatlantic Real Estate." If the "real estate" of what he terms "Christian Capitalism's" transatlantic commerce is "racial terror and violent incarceration of a 'raced' people," then we see its legacy vigorously renewed in the expanding Prison Industrial Complex and rapid propagation of slums around the globe.

The contributors to this special issue all approach Wright's work in the spirit of open inquiry and engagement that Wright's work modeled. They do not pretend to permanently resolve the problems manifest in Wright's work, but they do remind us of the continuing intellectual, ethical, and political value of joining Wright in what Michel Fabre rightly called his "unfinished quest."