CHAPTER I

Richard Wright's Triangulated South
Formation as Prelude and Preface

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Of Richard Wright, W. E. B. Du Bois exclaimed, "Born on a plantation, living in Elaine, Arkansas, and the slums of Memphis, he knows the whole Negro race!"[1] Du Bois rightly surmises that Wright based his knowledge of people on place; however, his expression of indignation may deflect from the significance of his own declaration. Wright's early trajectory through three southern states and from plantation to town marked his experience of life in the South and scarred his childhood with the hardships and deprivations of poverty and segregation. The triangulated spatial and cultural geography of Wright's childhood is often subsumed into his native state of Mississippi. In *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*, for example, Hazel Rowley joins four previous Wright biographers in rightly emphasizing Mississippi as the southern site of the brutal racial segregation and struggling impoverished family that had a powerful and debilitating impact on Wright's childhood.[2] But Mississippi's dominant position in Wright's biography can overshadow the roles of the adjacent states, Arkansas and Tennessee, in his development. His mobile childhood through three "changing same" states, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas, left indelible marks on his psyche that ultimately not only animated his characterization of that childhood, that South, and its people, but also influenced his creative vision and ways of achieving it through his work.

Richard Nathaniel Wright's origins were in rural Mississippi, a social and cultural geography of plantations, segregation, and poverty configured by historical conditions in that part of the Deep South. His September 4, 1908, birth on Rucker's Plantation, located between Roxie, Mississippi, and Natchez, began a life hampered by historical circumstances. As sharecroppers, his parents Nathan Wright and Ella Wilson Wright (born in 1880 and 1883, respectively) were subject to a world order that reinforced the post-Reconstruction subordination of black people into economic slavery and social oppression.

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The lives of the Wright family were governed by the 1890 Mississippi Constitution, which secured white supremacy by effectively disenfranchising blacks and empowering whites. That constitution inaugurated a two-dollar poll tax for voting and stipulated that the prospective voter show valid receipts from two previous elections and pass a literacy test by interpreting a passage from the 1890 Constitution, selected by the polling registrar. Designed to eliminate the large black population from participation in governance, the 1890 Constitution ensured that generations of black Mississippians, like the Wrights, would not only be excluded from the basic rights of political citizenship but also be subjected to a white power structure that would relegate them to lives of economic deprivation.

Dictated by both law and custom, racial segregation in the Mississippi of Wright's youth meant that a black person would be considered less than a white person. Laws under the state constitution required, for instance, that schools and prisons be segregated by race, that blacks could not bear arms, and that whites could not marry blacks or mulattos. Basically, these laws established a two-tier, Jim Crow society with the exclusion of blacks from ordinary protections under the law and from possibilities for advancement. With the enactment of the 1890 Constitution, segregation became official, along with the concomitant denial of or suppression of legal rights for black people, so that white Mississippians could recover from their dramatic losses following the Civil War and Emancipation and reclaim their former prestige by asserting political, social, and economic superiority over blacks. The southern states adjacent to Mississippi soon followed its model of legal maneuvers, so that Jim Crow reigned over the entire region at Wright's birth.

Denied opportunities for education and disenfranchised from voting, black Mississippians and their counterparts in bordering Arkansas and Tennessee lived in generational poverty. Many remained illiterate, without access to adequate schools or civic participation, until 1975 when voting restrictions were repealed two decades after the US Supreme Court ruled that they violated the rights of citizens under the US Constitution. The harsh conditions in all social, political, and economic matters adversely affected Wright's family and particularly his father, Nathan Wright, who was a sharecropper for much of his life and unable to provide adequately for his wife and sons, Richard and Leon Alan.

That backdrop determined Richard Wright's migratory childhood in desperate and often brutal circumstances. Nathan Wright moved his family from the plantation where Richard was born to nearby Natchez, where his wife Ella Wright's parents, Richard Wilson and Margaret Bolden

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Wilson, lived. The arrangement was brief because Nathan sought opportunity by relocating the family to Memphis, Tennessee, in 1911, when Richard was about three years old. Nathan did not prosper in the city. Systemic and personal strains on an illiterate Nathan Wright festered into his irrevocable split from his family. By 1912, the Wrights were no longer living together, and Ella supported herself and two sons as a cook until 1915 when she asked the Memphis court to secure financial support from her husband. Her effort failed. Nathan Wright abandoned his family, and an ill Ella had to place her sons in a Methodist orphanage before moving them back to Mississippi, initially to Travellers Rest Plantation, where they lived with Solomon Wright, Nathan's brother. In 1917, Ella returned once again to her mother's home, located in Jackson. That stay was also brief, as Ella moved with her sons to Elaine, Arkansas, where her younger sister Maggie lived. White violence forced Ella into yet another move to West Helena, Arkansas, after the murder of Maggie's husband, but subsequently, her poor health required that she return to her mother in Jackson.

Wright's multiple moves through three states from his birth through his teens defined his cumulative assessments of the South. His memories of pain, fear, and hunger from those years haunt *Black Boy*, his fourth book, and its revelations of how he escaped the South and became a writer. "Southern Night" is Wright's title for the first part of his *American Hunger*, the original, longer version of his successful memoir *Black Boy*. That title communicates Wright's perception of his youth. Rather than childhood being associated with morning and brightness or the dawn of beginning, for Wright, the darkness of night becomes the prevailing metaphor. By casting the southern region as night, he evokes a wide range of negative experiences and despairing images, such as his desperate need for money to alleviate some of his misery and his failed efforts at employment that brought him into humiliating contact with the physical, economic, and psychological dominance of whites and the cruelty with which they exercised that dominance.

While delivering in his memoir a vivid outline of factual events and a striking rendition of emotional responses to major aspects of his life under Jim Crow, Wright also cautions in "Blueprint for Negro Writing," "The relationship between reality and the artistic image is not always direct and simple. The imaginative conception of a historical period will not be a carbon copy of reality" ("BNW" 49). Notwithstanding the caution, Wright's account of the cultural geography of a segregated South in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas provides readers with access to the sociological complexity of that geography and its coalescence into a world

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view and vision of humanity that would not be easily supplanted. His dark memories of absence, brutality, and deprivation in the South fuel not only his autobiographical accounts but also his fictional works throughout his career. Joyce Ann Joyce aptly observes that Wright "depicts a physical world in which being Black means living in an impoverished milieu governed by the social and political laws of whites – laws that are manifest physically in the arrangements of entirely segregated communities – and being white means unwittingly suffering from the moral deprivation in enforcing that segregation."[3] That observation applies to his first novel *Native Son*, set in Chicago, portraying a black youth's connection to a maiming culture of segregation by simply referring to Bigger Thomas as "Just another scared colored boy from Mississippi" (*EW* 734). This also holds true for *The Long Dream*, Wright's last novel published during his lifetime, with its culminating focus on Mississippi and the triangulated South of his childhood.

Wright delineates in *Black Boy* how his own bodily and mental responses developed in reaction to the various forms of oppression and negation he perceived in his southern upbringing. Following a phantasmagorical dream collapsing whiteness and motherhood, he emerges from a near-death experience after a punishing beating by his mother. He celebrates his senses awakening to an overwhelming recognition of natural phenomena that "spoke with cryptic tongue": "the moments of living slowly revealed their coded meanings" (*LW* 9). Although he makes clear that his mother nearly killed him as a punishment for setting fire to his grandmother's house, he does not exonerate her but instead turns to twenty-three poetic statements associating events in nature with his innate desires to empower himself within his environment. The following two examples are representative:

> There was the teasing and impossible desire to imitate the petty pride of sparrows wallowing and flouncing in the red dust of country roads.
>
> There was the yearning for identification loosed in me by the sights of a solitary ant carrying a burden upon a mysterious journey. (*LW* 9)

This observed natural world that inspired Wright combined beauty and individualizing singular traits extracted from the human world's panoply of strengths and weaknesses. Nature, simultaneously beautiful and inspiring yet harsh and cruel, becomes Wright's model for placing himself in a central position of knowing and becoming.

Knowledge and access to knowledge mark the difference between how Wright represents his southern formation and how he perceives others in the same race-defined, hierarchical space. He linked his keen sense of

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observation to a love of reading, so that literacy and books became a second primary route to knowledge and the potential for freedom that knowledge bestowed.[4] Reading, then, abetted his discerning focus on nature. Together the two combined with his unforgiving assessment of human geography in segregated spaces to enable his separating himself from degrading circumstances and to propel himself upward from those sources, whether familial or environmental.

That psychological trajectory is akin to the geographical trajectory of Wright's youth. His many relocations in a tristate area defined his childhood and the fleeting, unstable nature of home. Spatial security was not a given; neither was the comfort of a familiar place with economic stability and the assurance of food. Each location and its concomitant movement reinforced a message about living under Jim Crow. The confluence of Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee as a segregated South provided Wright with an aggregated understanding of the formidable impact of place. That confluence also provoked his distancing himself and shielding himself from "the South" and its white as well as its black inhabitants. The examples of Tennessee and Arkansas are especially relevant in illustrating Wright's education in spatial and social awareness gleaned from the cultural geography of segregated places.

Wright's two different sojourns in Memphis, Tennessee, held particularly sobering lessons. His first stay in Memphis was as a young boy whose earliest memories were of traveling to the city and experiencing arbitrary treatment by his dismissive father, exposure to jesting saloon culture and mean street bullying, and separation from his mother. In that initial stay, Wright learned to exercise his will against patriarchal authority, to recognize the vagaries of adult black men, and to endure hunger, fear, and uncertainty. Deserted by his father, he recalled this urban period in his childhood as marked by hunger, which he depicted as literal, physical hunger, which morphed into spiritual and psychological hunger.

The devastating effects of Wright's first residency in Memphis emerge most fully in his damning portrait of his father at the end of the first chapter of *Black Boy*. Wright's pain in realizing his father's cruelty, the necessity of rejecting him, and the toll of being fatherless in an alien and unfamiliar environment receives dramatic representation in a fire lit room where Nathan Wright, ensconced with a woman, laughed at the plight of his desperate wife and hungry son. He offered a nickel for his son's hunger, but Ella Wright refused to allow Richard to accept. The incident, seared into Wright's consciousness, emerges apocalyptic in his memory: "I had the feeling that I had had to do with something unclean. Many times in the years after that the image of my father and the strange woman, their faces lit

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by the dancing flames, would surge up in my imagination so vivid and strong that . . . I would stare at it, feeling that it possessed some vital meaning which always eluded me" (*LW* 34). That memory, signifying the difficulty of rendering meaning because of the absurdity of the situation, the echo of demeaning laughter, and the feeling of helplessness, reverberates in thematic clusters throughout Wright's fiction. The locus of meaning most pronounced in Wright's reflection situates Memphis as the raw and unresolved site of rejection and loss of a father, a weak and ruined man who was the product of systemic racism and of his own "animalistic impulses" (*LW* 35). Such striking observations of personal and social history free Wright from the entanglements of relational identity. He becomes an independent thinker and free agent, one disconnected from parental and patriarchal authority.

Wright's second stay in Memphis as a teenager codified his understanding of how different spaces shaped human beings. His education was multifaceted. He encountered a property-owning black mother and daughter who bared their primal desires in overt ways that exacerbated Wright's sense of his unsophisticated rural background. His subsequent encounters with a hustling black youth and a self-debasing black man emphasized his naïve and limited knowledge of a different world, one more urban than any that existed in Mississippi. The largest learning curve for Wright was in relation to the white world and his acquiring through his employment a first-hand observation of how white men manipulated, humiliated, and debased blacks. His experiences of being pitted against other blacks and baited into a bloody fight for white betting spectators far exceeded the threats and insults he had known in Jackson. Exposed to painful and graphic instances of racist, cruel, and discriminatory treatment by Memphis whites in authoritative positions, Wright learned to remain silent under the pressures of living Jim Crow.

Memphis nonetheless fostered his intellectual development by expanding his access to books. He discovered the city's public library through a white coworker, whose library card Wright used to borrow books surreptitiously since blacks were denied borrowing privileges in the publicly funded space. He contrasted his second stay in Memphis to his father's experience in coping with white domination: "There had come to me through my living the knowledge that my father was a black peasant who had gone to the city seeking life, but who had failed in the city, a black peasant whose life had been hopelessly snarled in the city, and who had at last fled the city – that same city which had lifted me in its burning arms and borne me toward alien and undreamed of shores of knowing" (*LW* 35).

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Earlier in his childhood, Arkansas had already imprinted on Wright the vagaries of white supremacy and its consequences for black lives. In 1916, young Richard moved to Elaine, Arkansas, a plantation community in Phillips County, just over the border from Mississippi. There a comfortable existence in the household of his aunt Maggie and her husband Silas Hoskins had been shattered suddenly. Wright experienced in Elaine, Arkansas, the race-specific, deadly violence that whites could inflict without any consequences. Silas, who operated a profitable saloon, disappeared, killed by whites who wanted his business. While not described as a lynching, Silas's murder clearly qualifies as such. That act of violence against Silas was also an act of violence against the entire family because Wright's mother and aunt, in fear for their own lives, fled immediately to West Helena, Arkansas, with only what they could carry. The abrupt loss of home and security from violence perpetrated by whites in Arkansas was one of the prevailing memories of Wright's childhood. That agony emerges with power in "Long Black Song" from *Uncle Tom's Children*, when Silas, a black man who cannot protect his wife and child from white predators, refuses to run and shoots into a mob of white men as they burn down his house with him inside. The story resonates with the name of Wright's uncle, Silas Hoskins, as well as with the racial violence in Elaine.

The magnitude of the events in Arkansas should not be subsumed into a single event surrounding the disappearance of Silas Hoskins. During Wright's stay in Elaine, Helena, and West Helena, the atmosphere in that cotton farming region was becoming increasingly hostile and more oppressive because exploited black sharecroppers on Phillips County cotton plantations were being courted by the Progressive Farmers and Household Union. Unionizing threatened the local economy and racial hierarchy. The already vicious and unpunished treatment of black people erupted on September 30, 1919, in the violent outbreak known as the Elaine massacre. During that September after the Red Summer of 1919, which witnessed brutal violence against blacks across the nation, Elaine became the site of one of the bloodiest and deadliest attacks on black people. The estimated number of black lives lost ranges from 100 to 200. The exact number of blacks arrested and jailed in nearby Helena, Arkansas, is documented as 285.[5] Events in Elaine and Helena were national news, not just news in the neighboring Arkansas and Mississippi region. The anti-lynching crusader Ida Wells-Barnett interviewed some of the prisoners and wrote about the deaths in the Elaine massacre and the prisoners in the Helena stockades in her pamphlet "The Arkansas Race Riot," her dispatches from October 1, 1919. Walter F. White, who investigated

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lynching and race riots as Field Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, traveled to Arkansas and presented his findings on the massacre in the October 19, 1919, *Chicago Daily News*. The Helena trials of the blacks arrested in Elaine dragged on until 1925, the period in which the teenaged Wright left Jackson for Memphis. Not surprisingly, "Big Boy Leaves Home," the first story in *Uncle Tom's Children*, chronicles the innocence of black boys being shattered by the racial violence of lynching.

Overt physical violence was not the everyday manifestation of the power whites exerted over blacks. Socio-political power was not necessarily visible in ordinary instances in the segregated spaces blacks occupied. Some blacks had no direct contact with whites, even though white control was explicit in regulating every space that blacks could occupy. Wright's recounting of unwittingly selling a Ku Klux Klan newspaper in Jackson is just one instance of the invisible and manipulative control blacks experienced. Despite humiliations and deprivations, segregated Jackson also afforded some amenities for black survival and relative dignity. In Wright's case, for instance, Jackson offered the opportunity of schooling which, though limited and unequal, gave him access to the formal education that would nurture his hunger for knowledge.

Wright's positionality in relation to southern geographic space allowed him to see and to create in ways that did not adhere to expected norms of racial understanding, whether promulgated by whites or blacks. The element of exposé, sometimes devastatingly explicit and uncompromising, can be seen in his protest writing. The shock aspect, as in the portrayal of murder in *Native Son* or *The Outsider*, is a noticeable result in his fiction, but it appears as well in his naturalist treatment of his black family in *Black Boy*. He depicts terrifying images of his mother as a punishing disciplinarian and of his grandmother and members of her family as severe enforcers of rigid Seven Day Adventist beliefs and practices. The accumulated effect of disciplinary cruelty and rigid behaviors combined with the cold and unfeeling nature within a familial environment produced an overall forbidding atmosphere that shadowed Wright's development. His rebellion against the family's religious strictures, particularly his reading certain books and working on Saturday, the Sabbath, made him doubly an outlier within the family and in the South. Books gave him perspective and fostered his early escape through writing stories that nonetheless rendered him vulnerable and isolated. One result is his tendency to envision aloneness and isolation as fundamental themes, literary tropes, and philosophical tenets that undergird both naturalism and existentialism in his fiction.

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Given his perception of how his family had failed him and perpetrated cruelties again him, Wright yoked black southerners generally to a barren culture devoid of hope, kindness, and love (*LW* 37). He attributed that condition to the divided social space that subjugated blacks, fractured their visions of potential, and delimited their ability to see their lives clearly without distortion. The injuries Wright suffered in his southern years lingered into his adulthood, so that his reflections on the "bleakness of black life in America" and its "cultural barrenness" condemn racial segregation and expose its trace elements as effecting the very sensibilities of black people who exist within "negative confusions" (*LW* 37). In revealing the raw disturbing story of his youth, Wright displayed the wounds still unhealed in his relationship to his past, as "Black Confession," his working title for his memoir, intimates.[6] Unable to forget or ignore how black people were implicated in his development and complicit in their own condition, Wright presented, in contrast to Zora Neale Hurston, an unsettling portrait of black life. His indictment grew directly out of his truncated experience of hurt and damage. Hurston had already remarked on Wright's problematic relationship with the South in her review of his first book, *Uncle Tom's Children*, which she labeled "a book about hatreds."[7] Ralph Ellison and later James Baldwin would also observe unsettled issues in Wright's representation of black people. In "Richard Wright's Blues," Ellison equated the depth of the scars from Wright's childhood in his writing with the power of the blues as an expression of black life: "The Blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of brutal experience alive in one aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism."[8]

Years after Ellison, Margaret Walker probed the psychosexual spectrum of Wright's childhood for its transcendent impact on his imaginative writing. In her frequently overlooked book, Walker anticipated formulations by recent critics, such as John C. Charles, who theorize Wright's "queerness."[9] She characterized the "great trauma in his earliest and most formative years" while living in "a racially divided and poverty-stricken southland" as leading to repressed anger and psychological damage.[10] She suggested that the effects of "violent white racism" were compounded by his "neurotic family life" mired in "extreme poverty" and "religious fanaticism and cruelty resulting from sexual frustration" – together they fueled his writing.[11]

Wright's critics have understood what he aptly identified as "the terror from which I fled" (*LW* 246). Flight was necessary for survival and for his

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future as a writer, as he projected in the second half of his record of childhood and youth, "The Horror and the Glory" (*LW* 365). In recording his ascendancy from that culture, he exhibited a necessary hope that the individual black person could achieve full humanity and, by extension, that all black people could shed the shackles of ignorance and submission. As he put it: "I would hurl words into this darkness and . . . if an echo sounded . . ., I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human" (*LW* 365).

Out of his accumulated experiences in the South, Wright went on to create texts that reveal the fraught relationships between race, racial conditions, and spatial constraints (whether bodily, global, or textual). His textual production drew from the social geography of exclusion and containment he knew in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas. He demonstrated how Jim Crow's regulatory boundaries delimit not merely access to space, but also subject formation and agency.[12] Given what he understood about his own past in a triangulated South dominated by white racism, he displayed no nostalgia about black people as a race and none about the South as a region. Instead, Wright illuminated the normalizing and restrictive legal practices and social controls under segregation that not only produced a specific system of race-based identities and social relations in the South with its cruelly exaggerated forms and in the United States as a whole with its more subtle manifestations, but also produced in his own case a visionary creative writer.

Notes

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Richard Wright Looks Back: Harsh, Forbidding Memories of Negro Childhood and Youth," reprint in *Richard Wright's* Black Boy (American Hunger)*: A Casebook*, eds. William L. Andrews and Douglas Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 34.
2. Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 1–27.
3. Joyce Ann Joyce, *Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), 29.
4. Robert B. Stepto, "Literacy and Ascent: Richard Wright's *Black Boy*," in *Richard Wright's* Black Boy, 101–12.
5. See Grif Stockley Jr., *Blood in Their Eyes: The Elaine Race Massacre of 1919* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2001), and Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011).

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6. Arnold Rampersad, "Note on the Text," in *LW* 868.
7. Zora Neale Hurston, "Stories of Conflict," *The Saturday Review* (April 2, 1938), 32–33.
8. Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," 1945; reprinted in *Richard Wright's* Black Boy, 46.
9. John C. Charles, "A Queer Finale: Sympathy and Privacy in Wright's *A Father's Law*," in *Richard Wright: New Readings in the 21st Century*, eds. Alice Mikal Craven and Willian E. Dow (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 147–66.
10. Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright, Daemonic Genius* (New York: Warner Books, 1988), 4.
11. Ibid., 5.
12. See Thadious M. Davis, *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 135–84.

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