Native Geography: Richard Wright's Work for the Federal Writers' Project in Chicago.

Perhaps the most famous anecdote about the influence of the Federal Writers Project (FWP) on writers in its employ is that about Ralph Ellison, who--while working on the "Living Lore" folklore project in New York City--collected a story about an invisible man, the apparent inspiration for his later novel. More recently, in Go Gator and Muddy the Water, Pamela Bordelon has published many of Zora Neale Hurston's writings for the Florida project, revealing deep connections between Hurston's FWP fieldwork and the settings of her fiction. While Richard Wright is often hailed as the "poster child" for the Writers' Project, not enough has been written about the influence of the FWP on his work. The following previously unpublished essay by Wright, "A Survey of Amusement Facilities of District #35," clearly suggests that his work for the FWP was a major influence on Wright's fiction.

Scholars of African American literature now recognize a "Chicago Renaissance," led partly by Wright, as an important follow-up--and radical revision of the aesthetics of--the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Critics such as Robert Bone and Deborah Barnes trace the influence of African American writers in Chicago during this period, many of whom met while working on the Chicago Writers' Project. As early as 1950, Arna Bontemps claimed that while "Harlem got its renaissance in the middle twenties .... Ten years later Chicago reenacted it on WPA without finger bowls but with increased power" (46). A friend of Ellison's, Albert Murray, goes a step further, claiming that the FWP "put writers and artists in touch as they never had been before. It was even more intense than the Harlem Renaissance" (Brinkley B7).

The Illinois Writers' Project had "a healthier percentage [of African-American staffers] than in any other state," with nine African American writers on board (Rowley 108). Wright was on the payroll along with established and emerging talents such as Margaret Walker, Frank Yerby, and eventually Bontemps himself, who joined the Project in 1937. Given this group of luminaries, Bontemps's declaration about 1930's Chicago rivaling 1920's Harlem makes sense. In his seminal 1986 article proposing a "Chicago Renaissance," Robert Bone also discusses the "Wright generation," since Wright was as much if not more of an influence than geography in shaping the period's aesthetics and agenda. As Bontemps's and Murray's comments suggest, the Chicago Writers' Project was one of the most fertile sources for the Renaissance Wright sparked.

A close examination of the extensive and impressive work African American researchers and writers did for the Chicago project from 1936-1941 indicates that they had far more ambitious plans than the Project's ultimate publication record provides. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library (ALPL) in Springfield, Illinois, has the most extensive collection of materials written for the Illinois Writers' Project, including many by the African American unit. Plans exist for a book-length manuscript on The Negro in Illinois and another titled The Negro Press in Chicago [ALPL FWP Box 100], a lone researcher and author, Kitty Chappelle, penned a nearly 700-page manuscript on "The Development of Negro Culture in Chicago" [ALPL FWP Box 78]; and other writers produced shorter but complete manuscripts on various topics, such as the history of jazz music in Chicago, that seem close to publication readiness.

The Illinois Project's focus and goals became clearer as the Project evolved. Started in 1935, it initially focused, as did all the state projects, on amassing materials for a state guidebook, as well as collecting folklore and slave narratives, all duly represented in the ALPL's holdings. However, documents from the early years of the project also suggest that researchers and writers were amassing information simply to be amassing information; numerous summaries of recent books and multiple accounts of the general history of African Americans may partly confirm accusations that the WPA projects were simply "make-work." But as the project went along, and particularly after it came under state rather than federal control in 1939, its focus was more on particular topics and potential publications--though this inference may simply reflect what materials were
Wright's involvement with the Chicago Project came early: he joined in the fall of 1935 as a writer and as the only African American in a supervisory position at that point. He transferred to the Federal Theater Project briefly from January to July 1936, having applied for a transfer to that city's Writers' Project until he left Chicago for New York in May 1937, having applied for a transfer to that city's Writers' Project. (1) The transfer finally came through in December 1937 (Rowley 138); during this time, Wright wrote several crucial pieces: his manifesto "A Blueprint for Negro Writing" appeared in New Challenge, and "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch" in the 1937 FWP anthology American Stuff attracted praise from critics and condemnation by the Congressional Dies Committee (later the House Committee on Un-American Activities). On the same day that he was notified of his transfer to the New York City Writers' Project, he learned that Uncle Tom's Children had won Story magazine's contest for the best work produced by an FWP writer (Rowley 138). The publication of Uncle Tom's Children in 1938 enabled Wright to qualify to do "creative work" for the New York Project, a short-lived experiment that allowed a select few to work on their own writing full time, rather than on Project-specific research and publications (Rowley 145; Mangione 245). At this time Wright began work on Native Son.

In spite of the clear connections between Wright's work on the FWP and his emergence as a major new literary talent, criticism has not focused enough on the relationship between his FWP work and his personal literary output during the same era. Many historians of the FWP concur with Nelson Algren that "The writer whom the Illinois Writers' Project helped the most was Dick Wright" (Mangione 121); (2) but when Wright's involvement with the FWP is mentioned, it is most often in conjunction with the controversy of the Dies Committee's investigation of the "Jim Crow" essay as "Communist propaganda," which eventually was cited in the dismantling of the Federal Theater Project and the defederalization of the FWP.

"A Survey of Amusement Facilities of District #35," the undated manuscript that follows, especially evokes the Chicago geography of Wright's Native Son, in that the city significantly defines and conscribes not only Bigger Thomas's movements, but also his identity and agency. As Bigger tells Jack early on, "Every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful's going to happen to me" (20). In "A Survey of Amusement Facilities," Wright describes the same rigidly patrolled boundaries between black and white Chicago, emphasizing areas where worlds collide--dangerous "contact zones" that form the locales for the cafe where Jan and Mary coerce Bigger into dining with them, and where Blum's store is located. There is also an explicit geographic connection: in the novel, Bigger tells Mr. Dalton he lives at 3721 Indiana Avenue (Native Son 48); Wright's address at the time, listed at the top of the first page of the ms, is 3743 Indiana Avenue.

In her biography of Wright, Margaret Walker describes the segregated Chicago Wright found when he arrived in 1927: "The demographic and ethnographic patterns of the city were rapidly changing--crystallizing into ethnic neighborhoods of Irish and Polish, Swedish and Lithuanian, Jewish ghettos, Italian and Negro slums--back of the yards and front of the yards. Negroes had first lived on the West Side ... and then they had edged further south and eastward. The eastern boundary in the 1930s became Cottage Grove ... " (55). According to Walker, by the 1930s, Chicago's "South Side" had clearly emerged as a distinct and important center of African American culture, an "extraordinary place" where "night life was fun, and being black in a black world was completely comfortable" (Walker 66-67).

Both Wright's FWP essay and Native Son play with these cultural scenes and the ambiguity of Chicago's racial boundaries in the 1930s. While Bigger may initially feel "comfortable" being "black in an all black world," he is nevertheless painfully aware of "me being here and they being there," and keenly feels the boundaries--physical and cultural--that oppress him. These borderlines eventually lead to the "something awful" that happens to Bigger, and ultimately trap him as the scope of the manhunt narrows to make Bigger the focal point of the black community.
As the novel suggests, these boundaries are largely imaginary; in the FWP essay, Wright notes more explicitly that "it is well to remember that [Cottage Grove Avenue] is the so-called 'dividing line' between the white and black neighborhoods. Naturally, some of the places are understood to be for white and others for Negro" ("Survey" 11-12). Wright underscores the paradoxically fluid and utterly rigid boundaries of emerging ethnic neighborhoods in Chicago; only a street-savvy native son of the South Side would know, on a day-to-day basis, where the dividing lines lay.

While Walker's description of South Side amusements includes such eminent locales as the Savoy Ballroom and the Regal Theatre and their headliners--Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Ella Fitzgerald (Walker 66-67)--Bigger and his friends enjoy no such top-drawer entertainment. In the FWP essay, Wright instead describes establishments similar to the locales in Native Son, often emphasizing their degenerate nature: we learn that the pool-room takes "third place among amusements [sic] spots," "sink[ing] in general character even below the tavern and restaurant" ("Survey" 6). The most "vicious" of hangouts, the pool-room in Native Son is where Bigger hatches his scheme to rob Blum and where he stabs Gus. The other crucial locale early in the novel, a movie theater, is also described in the survey; Wright notes that "the influence of these..., theatres reaches deeply into the everyday life of the community. The gestures and idioms of the movie stars are aped by school children and adults" ("Survey" 9). The "aping" Wright describes in the survey recalls the much-noted moment early in the novel when Bigger and Jack "play 'white' " (Native Son 17), and Bigger tells Jack that he does not know what the term "left flank" means, but he "heard it in the movies" (Native Son 18).

"A Survey of Amusement Facilities" is one of several pieces in the FWP archives of the ALPL that identify Wright as author. (3) Others include the essay "Ethnographical Aspects of Chicago's Black Belt," dated September 29, 1936; one titled "(Additional) On the Ethnography of the Negro," dated January 13, 1936; an undated article on hotels in the Black belt; an article about the Chicago Urban League, dated January 8, 1936; and an undated "Bibliography on Negro in Chicago" [sic], which lists various government documents, books, and other publications on black history, especially in Chicago and Illinois. (4) Additionally, Wright is listed as a "fieldworker" on an undated essay titled "The Negro in Chicago." (5) Some or all of these may have been written for inclusion in the Illinois edition of the FWP's "American Guide" series, though nothing resembling these pieces appears there. (6)

"A Survey of Amusement Facilities" is the most conventionally literary of these identified works by Wright, and its tone echoes the voice in much of his fiction: a curious hybrid of the keen observer who can construct an entire cultural reality out of concrete minutiae, and of the sardonic social critic alternately voicing righteous indignation and respect. It also displays Wright's skill at ethnographic writing; though this piece does not title itself "ethnography" as do some others, it illustrates exactly the "thick description" espoused by ethnographer Clifford Geertz. It is a fascinating example of how heavily Wright was influenced by his informal association with the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago, a revolutionary source of urban ethnography in the 1920s and 1930s (7). These associations along with his increasingly left politics heavily influenced both Wright's FWP work and the harsh naturalism of his own emerging fictional aesthetic. For these reasons as well as its clear connection to the locales and themes of Native Son, then, "A Survey of Amusement Facilities" seems the most relevant of Wright's work for the Chicago FWP.

The ALPL's FWP collection includes a short history of the Federal Theater Project in Chicago, written by Harold Rogers in January 1940, shortly after the theater project was disbanded. Rogers chronicles his own research process with FTP records found in the attic of Chicago's "old Moose Hall":

When I started to write this article, I made an attempt to find all of the factual material available.... lit is] not catalogued or indexed [but] stored helter-skelter in packing boxes which have been strewn about .... However, I did find a few bits of information. I found them and then threw them away, for I saw that
any true survey of the Negro on the Federal Theatre ... has to do 
... with the stories of the people who worked on this project and 
with the human hope and endeavor that went into their 
productions...." (n.p.; italics added)

Rogers may merely be suggesting that he disregarded some "bits of information" he discovered in his research. However, if Rogers was tossing materials out--either literally or figuratively--as early as 1940, who knows what else has been lost or overlooked since? To be sure, we may never know whether other FWP work was produced and subsequently destroyed. The Wright materials that remain offer a tantalizing hint of the deep influence of the FWP in the development of a young writer on the brink of enormous success.

Richard Wright

3743 Indiana Avenue

Apartment #1

District #35

A SURVEY OF THE AMUSEMENT FACILITIES OF DISTRICT #35 State Street, from 860C south to 360C south, is almost solidly lumpen-proletariat. The places of amusement are many, but of a single character. Numerically, the **beer taverns** predominate, there being about twenty-five. Dingy cafes and restaurants are a close second, there being about twenty. There are eight **pool-rooms**, seven **drug-stores**, four **smoke-shops**, and two **movies**.

This section was once the high spot of the Negro Rialto district. That, however, was in the prosperous twenties. Since then the more well-to-do workers, gamblers, pimps, prostitutes, sports, end business men have moved southward to the vicinities of 47th and 55th streets. What this section once was can be seen from the numerous 'For Rent' and 'For Sale' signs hanging in store windows. Many of the establishments are now completely abandoned. Official notices of "This Building is Condemned" are posted in many places. Crumbling walls and peering paint are everywhere, lurid advertisement posters are plastered on the sides and walls of buildings.

Most of the beer taverns are dark, dank places where the neighborhood drunks hang out night and day. The beer sells for five and ten cents a stein. The whiskey for twenty-five cents a drink. Usually a bowl of soup, crackers and shrimps, or a hot-dogs or an egg is given with a purchase of beer. Electric pianos are an added attraction. The larger places are owned by Jews, Greeks, and Italians. The smaller ones by Negroes. Each place employs from three to five people, paying them from five to eight dollars, per week.

The "day" business of these taverns is small. But they are crowded to capacity at night. The more pretentious taverns have small orchestras which play for customers, in the more ornate establishment a floor show is arranged. There are costumed cigarette-girls and waitresses. Dancing is permitted. Usually there is no cover-charge, for competition is keen. The cost of the entertainment is recovered through the sale of high priced drinks. The talent of the entertainers is nil. Most, of them are amateurs, and are scoured from nearby neighborhoods.

The ideological import of the entertainment is largely sexual. Blues and popular songs are sung. Dances, such as the Continental and Snake-hips, are performed. Fights are many and frequent.

All of these taverns, no matter how small or mean, strive to maintain a home-like atmosphere for their patrons. The names of the taverns run something like this: Jim's Place, Babes's Tavern, Bob's Beer Shop, etc. The customers know the proprietor and the proprietor know the first names of many of his customers.
As strange it may germ, a great many "bootleg" Joints are still doing a rushing business in this area. The reason for this is not far to sock. The price of legal whiskey is still much too high for many of the poorer drinkers.

However, the old-time 'beer-flats, have completely vanished. With the legalization of whiskey the alcoholics have transferred their patronage to the tavern. The bangers-on are for the most part habitual drunkards, unemployed workers, petty theives, prostitutes, and a few young men still in high school.

Perhaps the most affluent of the State Street taverns is the Cabin Inn at 3353. The floor show is reputed to be the best on the South Side. It is what is known as a "black-and-tan" tavern, that is, it caters to Negro as well as white trade. Many of the jokes, songs, and dances of the entertainers find their way into the daily speech and actions of the people.

The next in popularity is the South Side Cotton Club at 3445 State street. It's entertainment generally resembles that of the Cabin Inn.

Some of these taverns are literally "holes-in-the wall". They are about ten feet wide, forty or fifty feet long. The rent, it is rumored, run from about forty to sixty and eighty dollars a month.

If the taverns are dingy, the restaurants are dingier. Some of them are huge places, reaching back to the alleys. Others are but shacks held together by rusty pieces of tin and old boards. Some handle a well-rounded menu while others specialize in unique dishes, mostly of Southern origin.

Perhaps the largest and most typical of these restaurants is Footes, Restaurant at 3032 State Street. Because of the low-priced food, this place is almost always crowded. Like the other it is dingy and unclean. A bowl of hot soup can be had for 5 cents. Rice and gravy for 5 cents. Coffee and doughnuts for 5 cents. Corn beef hash for 10 cents. Etc., etc.

The next in esteem is Bud's Eat Shop at 3406 State Street. This place specializes in fish, tripe, and short orders.

The Lincoln Doughnut House at 3055 State Street is among the best in the neighborhood, serving food at medium prices. There are many chilli parlors, selling chilli at ten cents per bowl.

There are numerous lunch-wagons, shoe-shine and soft-drink parlors, red-hot stands, hamburger stands, and barbecue pits. Most of the ice-cream parlors are closed because of winter.

Vying for third place among the amusements spots is the pool-room. If it can be imagined, these sink in general character even below the tavern and restaurant.

The proprietors of most of them are Negroes. Each pool-room carries its own unique following.

Some of these places are indeed vicious. Unsuspecting strangers are lured in and filched of their money through various schemes and rackets. Nothing is done to make these places physically attractive. The walls and ceilings are usually bare and full of cow-webs. The floor is bare and littered with cigar and cigarette butts. The plumbing is bad. Many of them are heated with stoves. A typical description of a pool-room in this vicinity would run something like this: A store about thirty feet wide and from sixty to ninety feet long. Two, three, four, or five sagging billiard tables. A few rickety chairs lined along the walls. Stale air. One or two rusty spittoons. A short cigar counter behind which stand the owner and his cash register. That is all.

The smoke-shops have the air and character of smoke-shops everywhere. A straggling crowd files in and out of them.
It is here that the neighborhood wiseacres congregate to dispute the merits of political and religious isms.

Only incidentally are the drug-stores places of amusement. They carry many "chance games" which attract crowds, Slot-machines, punch-boards, mad various other gambling devices lure many.

There are two main theatres on this section of State Street. At the lower end of the district is the State Street Theatre which is widely patronized. It specializes in sex, murder, gangster, adventure, and western films. It is a ill-smelling and dank house, seating about a thousand. It keeps the sidewalk littered with lurid posters. The other theatre is the Grand at 3110 State Street, and is of like calibre.

These two theatres employ bold means to lure their customers.

When there is a red-hot murder mystery film they hire "sound trucks" to patrol the streets or the neighborhood. Handbills and throw-aways are given to passersby. They also operate weekly and nightly contests to keep the interest of their customers. Cheap glassware, cheap cigarette cases, and other bite of tinsel are given to the holders of lucky numbers.

The influence of these two theatre, reaches deeply into the everyday life of the community. The gestures and idioms of the movie stars are aped by the school children and adults.

Wabash Avenue presents a sharp contrast to State Street. From 26th Street to 36th Street there are no places of amusement worth mentioning. The neighborhood is of a peculiarly mixed character. There are laundries, dry-cleaning establishments, churches, barbershops, grocery stores, sign-painting shops, hotels, private homes--all jumbled together.

Also from 2600 to 3600 on Michigan Avenue one finds practically no places of amusement. The entire street in this vicinity is given over to private homes, kitchenettes, automobile clubs, law offices, hospitals, printing plants, etc.

Indiana Avenue offers but little more. Five or six beer taverns of a mediocre sort are to be found within the tan-block area. The best restaurant is Sam's Buffett at 29th and Indiana Avenue, selling medium priced foods. It caters mostly to white trade. Of a like standard is the Trianon Restaurant at 3030 Indiana Avenue. It caters mostly to Negro trade.

There is one movie house, the Avenue Theatre, a cheap one, specializing in romantic films for the neighborhood housewives. A few dingy barbecue stands and pool-rooms account for remaining amusements.

Prairie Avenue is mainly residential. With one or two exceptions the entire area reveals nothing but a decaying houses, vacant lots, and condemned buildings.

At 2641 Calumet Avenue one finds the first playground in the district. It is a very badly equipped and muddy place adjoining the John B. Drake Public School. Further south on Calumet Avenue is another playground adjoining the Douglas Public School. Here the grounds are a little better and the equipment tolerable. Both of these playgrounds are frequented by Negro children.

Rhodes and Giles Avenues offer nothing in the way of entertainment.

South Park is given over entirely to homes, churches, and business places.

It is not until we reach Cottage Grove Avenue that taverns and pool-rooms again become prevalent. And it is well to remember that this street is the so-called "dividing line" between the
white and black neighborhoods. Naturally, some of the places are understood to be for white and others for Negro. The street is mainly commercial. Tin smiths, tailors, realtors, doctors, notion stores, etc., form the bulk of the business establishments. Most of the stores are owned by Jews and Greeks.

There are about ten taverns in the ten-block area. On the whole they are of a better character than those found on State Street.

31st and 35th Streets are the two main business thoroughfares running east and west through the district.

The places of amusement have the same general tone of those on State Street and Cottage Grove Avenue. On 31st Street, the heart of the old Negro Rialto district, is Brown's Tavern at 352. This place is typical of others found in this vicinity. There is a bar which sell beer, whiskey, and wines. In the rear is a dim, curtained-off space for dancing. Across the street at 340 is the site of the old Plantation, the most popular dance and dine spot during the days of Prohibition. It is now completely abandoned and nailed-up.

Generally, this about covers the amusement, entertainment, and recreational facilities to be found in this district. There are, however, other places of amusement of a peculiar nature. That is, sponsored by various churches. But these are so mixed in character that I think it advisable to report on them separately.

Works Cited


headed "Negro material-The Negro in the Federal Theater."


Notes

(1.) Biographies by Fabre, Rowley, and Walker detail Wright's history on the Chicago FWP, with Walker providing a particularly personal account, since she was also with the project at the time.

(2.) Similarly, the Columbia Literary History of the United States notes that "Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison were among the Project's notable beneficiaries" (Aaron 752-53).

(3.) At least one other institution appears to hold additional copies of some of these materials: the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature, housed at the Woodson Branch of the Chicago Public Library, has "Ethnographical Aspects of Chicago's Black Belt" and "Bibliography on the Negro in Chicago," as well as other Wright documents.

(4.) These pieces may be found, respectively, in the following locations in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library: FWP Box 199, folder headed "Negro in Chicago, Folder A"; FWP Box 199, folder headed "Negro in Chicago, Folder B"; FWP Box 198, folder headed "Negro Material-Stores, Hotels, Restaurants"; FWP Box 198, folder headed "Negro Material-670, 673-674, 675-Social Service Agencies"; and FWP Box 198, folder headed "Negro Bibliography." Walker and Fabre mention two of these pieces in their works: the "Ethnographic Aspects" essay and the "Bibliography of Chicago Negroes" (Walker 69, Fabre 546n), but not the piece reprinted here.

(5.) ALPL FWP Box 199, folder headed "Negro in Chicago, Folder A."

(6.) See Illinois Descriptive and Historical Guide.

(7.) For more on this influence, see Barnes and also Bone.

Rosemary Hathaway is Assistant Professor of English at West Virginia University, She has previously published articles on Zora Neale Hurston and Barbara Neely in the Journal of American Folklore and Critique, respectively.

COPYRIGHT 2008 African American Review