

28 NOVEMBER 2010 MARKS THE HALF CENTENNIAL OF  
RICHARD WRIGHT'S DEATH IN PARIS, FRANCE

By Julia Wright

Only two years ago, we were commemorating the Centennial of my father's birth. In a few days, the half-Centennial of his death will be upon us. That narrow frame of two years speaks to us of life spans shortened by poverty since slavery, by the stress rampant during the cold war, by hunger and anger in a culture of racism, by an era of dirty tricks. That two year gap can best be described by a haiku he wrote a few months before his death:

Burning out its time,  
And timing its own burning,  
One lonely candle.

He died in Paris at the age of 52 and was cremated at the Père Lachaise Cemetery.

Those who saw the documentary "Black Boy : the life of Richard Wright" directed by Madison Lacy know that the film ends with the camera trying to wind its way around an iron staircase to locate the niche where my father's urn rests behind a plaque in a corner, in the shadows, invisible. His name is not in the cemetery's official guide booklet and so many visitors have confided:"It took the longest time to find him".

Two years ago, on a hot June day, a group of us gathered near his resting place to celebrate his hundredth birthday by reading his and other writers' haiku written on paper flowers with wire stems, laying them once read on the cement below his plaque. The last of the african american expatriate writers were there, from the youngest - Jake Lamarr - to our elder, James Emanuel. John Edgar Wideman who had come from the States for the Richard Wright Conference, stood somber and brooding beyond the stairs. A Professor from South Africa poured libation and we sure did raise some ghosts.

I hope that those of you who have read and been stirred to meaning by Richard Wright will find a moment to pay silent or vocal, physical or spiritual tribute to the passing from amongst us of an artist as a young man, of the father of *Black Boy* and *Bigger Thomas*.

If you are in Paris, his urn number 848 is to be found at the top of the hill in the "Columbarium". About 300 yards downhill of one of the most mysteriously beautiful gardens in Paris is a small administrative building devoted to maintenance and the guidance of visitors. You can leave a trace of your passage that day - or any other day for that matter - by entering and letting the Administrator-in-Charge know that you bear a brief letter( name, address, profession) expressing your wish to see Richard Wright's name added to the list of of the personalities whose resting place is shown on the map. I was informed that it is the quantity of requests which will ultimately determine whether Richard Wright's name is to be found next to André Malraux and Gertrude Stein the woman who had written to him:"Dick, you and I are the only geniuses of the twentieth century".

Let me know and as the list grows I will follow it up with the cemetery deciders.

But this is not a touristic venture and you may be elsewhere;

If you are in New York, the laying of a remembered quote, a flower or a thought for him on the Richard Wright Bench at Fort Greene Park where he wrote "Native Son" and noted about Bigger: "*But hope was always waiting somewhere deep down in him*" is something I would personally love to do because I have not been on that pilgrimage yet.

If you are in Newhaven at Yale, look for the Beinecke Library, the resting place of his papers and his relentless dreams of writing

Or if you are in Chicago, you might just try going by the Post Office to ask where the "old building" is - the one where part of "Lawd Today" takes place , the place Cross Damon in "The Outsider" calls "the University"- and leave a letter for Dick there.

Or if you are in Memphis, try the modern-fronted, red limestone Cossitt Library - part of which I hear might be torn down . At the Cossitt entrance there is a plaque commemorating the episode in "Black Boy" where Dick forges a letter to get past segregation and borrow the books he so hungered for.

Or if you are in Natchez near his birthplace, I hear Hurricane Katrina and the others left Dick's marker alone, up on the buff over the Mississippi.

Or if you happen to be driving the Wright part of the newly dedicated Highway 84....

Or if you are alone with your words, your guitar, your saxo, your drums.... your Blues.....

Part of commemorating is to make the invisible part of our historical landscapes visible - and mark them against oblivion, so that our black things will not be destroyed.

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