

## The Wright Tradition

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I read Richard Wright in high school and college. *Black Boy* stunned me. His South was not the one I had known as a child or a young adult. He felt repressed and trapped, the product of a social system that put democracy to shame. Such oppressive circumstances account for the fierce urgency of his writing, for once he had left the South, he gave total dedication to understanding and exposing the legacy of racism in his native land. He earned his reputation—and both the affection and condemnation of critics—for reminding us of who we are as Americans and how we do and do not relate to one another. Wright saw the difference between the dream and the reality, the “fear” that was so often turned into our “fate.” He became our “race” writer, and even when he wanted to move on, neither his readers nor his critics would allow it.

Wright’s literary reputation was firmly in place by the time I went to graduate school; that is to say, he was perhaps the first black writer with sufficient reputational capital to become the topic of a dissertation. And he became the topic of mine. Wright lived to see his books become best sellers, to see America begin to understand and condemn its ways, but he would not live to see his works become those foundational texts of a new field of study. My moment of entry into the academy saw him bashed and reviled, but I took my lessons from Wright, to make my academic and scholarly career a “weapon” for change. I had excellent support. J. Saunders Redding, one of Wright’s foremost critics, directed my dissertation. Each argument with him increased my motivation to pursue Wright Studies. I was not alone. Margaret Walker encouraged me to take a job at Mississippi—which Redding discouraged—but it was Wright drawing me there. The very place from which he had fled was the place that would provide my young family and me a new education. Wright was dead, but Walker was still very much alive, and our conversations were often about Wright. Wright knew the “Horror and the Glory” of Mississippi well; it, more than anything, accounted for his “American Hunger.” It spoke to me in other ways, as I began my career at Ole Miss. In 1983, the Project on the History of Black Writing was born to build an expanded base of scholarship for Wright and other writers. In 1985, we brought Wright back home on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death. It was the first Wright international conference, ironically held in his home state and the university, to which he had never been invited to speak and could have never attended. Many Wright scholars, new and old, teachers and students met each other for the first time at that conference. The dialogues were unbelievably intense. Walker read from her forthcoming biography there, offering her vivid and troubling recollections. It was a time for passing the torch. I believe a new generation of Wright scholars were born that day in 1985.

All who were gathered there stayed in touch through the Richard Wright Circle, a small professional organization that emerged following the conference. It allowed us the space to think more and write about him. In 1994, Mississippi Public Broadcasting produced Wright’s story, *Black Boy*, a film biography, written, directed, and produced by Madison Davis Lacy. It appeared on PBS and is still seen frequently.

Today, 25 years later, Wright’s work continues to resonate for me. I have taught, written and lectured about him each year since that eventful conference. I invite papers from students that explore the meaning of his work for their lives. Most of them know nothing of which he speaks,

but they listen hard, because Wright cannot be ignored, his words so compelling, his passion so extreme, his ideas so pivotal and controversial; they inevitably want more. They want to ask him questions; they want to know how the America that he knew could ever have been. For this reason, Wright is never dated, but is renewed with each generation. Richard Wright is our tradition, his works our modern day classics.

Although Wright has been dead for fifty years, there is no better place that we can go to enhance our understanding of the world that we have inherited, one that still confounds us daily. His life in US and in Paris, where he spent the last decades of his life, continue to inspire, not just readers, but those who make the pilgrimage to Paris from all walks of life. Does one dare leave the city of light, without seeing “Wright’s Paris”?

This 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary is an occasion to remember and reread, to debate, to make Wright our own. We have already begun to do that. Pre-centennial, centennial and post-centennial activities have given us many opportunities: a year-long reading group in Natchez, with Jerry Ward; an international celebration in Japan, hosted by the Japanese Black Studies Association; “Making the Wright Connection,” an NEH national teachers’ institute, which continues through 2011.

The Project on the History of Black Writing is committed to expanding the Wright Connection. We want to ensure that Wright is being actively taught and studied, and that we are all talking to each other as we do so. We invite you to join our Virtual Seminar discussions, facilitated by the KU’s Ermal Garinger Academic Resource Center. The first one, held Saturday, November 20, with Yoshinobu Hakutani (Kent State University) will be followed by at least four more in 2011. Second, we urge you to join the Richard Wright Circle, which will come under the HBW umbrella in 2011. By joining on line, you become part of a global Wright Connection. All back issues of the Circle’s newsletter will be available at this site. The newsletter will begin a new series with its new online presence. As before, membership fees will be minimal.

We have come a long way since that first international conference 25 years ago. The Wright Connection has never stopped growing. There is life after death for Wright, as we continue to set intellectual precedents in the Wright tradition.

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