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for Literary & Artistic African-American Themes

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Let those who shy at the nationalist implications of Negro life look at the body
of folklore,
living and powerful, which rose out of a unified sense of a common life and a
common fate.

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Blueprint for Negro Literature

By Richard Wright

1. The Minority Outlook

Somewhere in his writings Lenin makes the observation that oppressed minorities often reflect the techniques of the bourgeoisie more brilliantly than some sections of the bourgeoisie themselves. The psychological importance of this becomes evident when one recalls that oppressed minorities, and especially petty bourgeois sections of oppressed minorities, strive to assimilate the virtues of the bourgeoisie in the assumption that by doing so, they can lift themselves into a higher social sphere. But not only among the oppressed petty bourgeoisie does this occur.

The workers of a minority people also strive to forge organizational forms of struggle to better their lot and they manifest the same restlessness. Lacking the handicaps of false ambition and property, they have access to a wide social vision and a deep social consciousness. They display a greater freedom and initiative in

pushing their claims upon civilization than even the petty bourgeoisie. Their organizations show greater strength, adaptability, and efficiency than any other group in society.

That Negro workers have demonstrated this consciousness and mobility for political and economic action there can be no doubt. But has this consciousness been reflected in the work of Negro writers? Has it been manifested in Negro writing in the same degree as it has been in the Negro workers' struggle to free the Scottsboro boys, in the struggle to free Herndon in the fight against lynching? Have they as creative writers taken advantage of their unique minority position? The answer decidedly is no. Negro writers have lagged sadly, and the gap between the militant Negro workers and the Negro writers widens relentlessly.

How can the hiatus between Negro workers and Negro writers be bridged? How can the enervating influence of this long-standing split be eliminated? In presenting a problem of this sort, the old accepted attitude of following precedent can lead nowhere. A slavish respect for past standards hinders rather than helps. An attitude of self-consciousness and self-criticism is far more likely to be a fruitful point of departure than a mere recounting of past achievements.

Since there is a big task to be done, an emphasis upon tendency and experiment, a view of the world as something becoming rather than as something fixed and admired, is the one which points the way for Negro writers to stand shoulder to shoulder with Negro workers in mood and outlook.

2. The Role of Negro Writing: Two Definitions

Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, decorous ambassadors who go a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people. These were received as poodle dogs who have learned clever tricks.

White America never offered them any serious criticism. The mere fact that a Negro could write was astonishing. Nor was there any deep concern on the part of white America with what role Negro writing should play in American culture; and if there was any role, it was through accident rather than intent or design. It crept in through the kitchen in the form of jazz and jokes.

On the other hand, these often technically brilliant performances by Negro writers were looked upon by the majority of literate Negroes as something to be proud of. At best, Negro writing has been external to the lives of educated Negroes themselves. That the productions of their writers should have been something of a guide in their daily living is a matter which seems never to have been raised seriously. Negro writing became a sort of conspicuous ornamentation.

In short, Negro writing on the whole has been the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America. Rarely has the best of this writing been addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, and aspirations. Through misdirection Negro writers have been far better to others than they have been to themselves. And the mere recognition of this places the whole question of Negro writing in a new light and raises a doubt as to the validity of its present direction.

There is, however, a culture of the Negro which has been addressed to him and him alone, a culture which has, for good or ill, helped to clarify his consciousness and create emotional attitudes which are conducive to action. This culture has stemmed mainly from two sources: (1) the Negro church; and (2) the fluid folklore of the Negro people.

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It was through the portals of the church that the American Negro first entered the shrine of Western culture. Living under slave conditions of life, bereft of his African heritage, the Negro found that his struggle for religion on the plantation between 1820–60 was nothing short of a struggle for human rights. It remained a relatively progressive struggle until religion began to ameliorate and assuage suffering and denial.

Even today there are millions of Negroes whose only sense of a whole universe, whose only relation to society and man, and whose only guide to personal dignity comes through the archaic morphology of Christian salvation.

It was, however, in a folklore moulded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life that the Negro achieved his most indigenous expression. Blues, spirituals, and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth, the whispered words of a black mother to her black daughter on the ways of men, the confidential wisdom of a black father and to his black son, the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from boy to boy in the deepest vernacular, work songs sung under blazing suns, all these formed the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed.

One would have thought that Negro writers, in their last century of striving at expression, would have continued and deepened this last effort, would have tried to create a more intimate and yet more social system of artistic communication between them and their people. But the illusion that they could escape, through individual achievement, the harsh lot of their race swung Negro writers away from any such path. Two separate cultures sprang up: one for the Negro masses, crude, instinctive, unwritten, and unrecognized; and the other the sons and daughters of a rising Negro bourgeoisie, bloodless, petulant, mannered, and neurotic.

Today the question is, Shall Negro writing be for the lives and consciousness of the Negro masses, moulding those lives and consciousness toward new goals, or shall it continue begging the question of the Negroes' humanity?

3. The Problem of Nationalism in Negro Writing

In stressing the difference between the role Negro writing failed to play in lives of the Negro people, and the role it should play in the future if it is to serve its historic function; in pointing out the fact that Negro writing has been addressed in the main to a small white audience rather than to a Negro one, it should be known that no attempt is made to propagate a specious and blatant nationalism. Yet, the nationalist character of the Negro people is unmistakable. Psychologically this nationalism is reflected in the whole of Negro culture, and especially in folklore.

In absence of fixed and nourishing forms of culture, the Negro has a folklore which embodies the memories and hopes of his struggles. Not yet caught in paint or stone and as yet but feebly depicted in the poem and novel, the Negroes' most powerful images of hope and longing for freedom still remain in the fluid state of living speech. How many John Henrys have lived and died on the lips of these black people? How many mythical heroes in embryo have been allowed to perish for lack of husbanding by alert intelligence?

Negro folklore contains, in a measure that puts to shame more deliberate forms of expression, the collective sense of the Negroes' life in America. Let those who shy at the nationalist implications of Negro life look at the body of folklore, living and powerful, which rose out of a unified sense of a common life and a common fate. Here are those vital beginnings of that recognition of value in life as it is lived that marks the emergence of a new culture in the shell of the old.

And at the moment that starts, at the moment a people begin to realize a meaning in their suffering, the civilization which engenders that suffering is doomed. Negro folklore remains the Negro writer's most powerful weapon, a weapon which he must sharpen for the hard battles looming ahead, battles which will

powerful weapon, a weapon which he must sharpen for the hard battles looming ahead, battles which will test a people's faith in themselves.

The nationalist aspects of Negro life are as sharply manifest in the social institutions of the Negro people as in folklore. There is a Negro church, a Negro press, a Negro social world, a Negro sporting world, a Negro business world, a Negro school system, Negro professions, in short, a Negro way of life in America.

The Negro people did not ask for this, and if they express themselves through their institutions and adhere to this special way of life, this special existence was forced upon them from without by lynch rope, bayonet, and mob legislation. And what few crumbs of American civilization the Negro has gotten from the tables of capitalism have been through these special, separate institutions. No attempt is made here to glorify these institutions.

Many of them are cowardly and incompetent; but they are all that the Negro has. And any move, whether for progress or reaction, must come through them and them alone for the simple reason that all other channels are closed. Negro writers who seek to mould or influence the consciousness of the Negro people must address their messages to them through the ideologies and ideals fostered in such a cramping and warping way of life.

The social institutions of the Negro are imprisoned in the Jim Crow political system of the South, and this Jim Crow political system in turn is built upon a plantation feudal economy. Hence, it can be seen that the emotional expression of group-feeling which puzzles so many people and leads them to deplore what they call "black chauvinism" is not a morbidly inherent trait of the Negro, but instead is the reflex expression of a life whose roots are imbedded deeply in Southern soil.

Negro writers must accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them. They must accept the concept of nationalism because in order to transcend it they must possess and understand it. And a nationalist spirit in Negro writing means a nationalism carrying the highest possible pitch of social consciousness.

It means a nationalism that knows its limitations, that is aware of the dangers of its position, that knows its aims are unrealizable within the framework of capitalist America; a nationalism whose reason for being lies in the simple fact of self-possession and in the consciousness of the interdependence of people in modern society.

For Negro writers, even more so than for Negro politicians, nationalism is a bewildering and vexing question, the full ramifications of which cannot be touched upon in a paper of this sort. But among the Negro workers and the Negro middle class the spirit of nationalism is rife in a hundred devious forms; and a simple literary realism, which seeks to depict the lives of these people, devoid of wider social connotations, devoid of nationalist tendencies, devoid of the revolutionary significance of even its nationalist tendencies, must of necessity do a rank injustice to the Negro people and alienate their possible allies in the struggle for liberation.

If there are writers, white or black, whose social consciousness is so barren that they cannot see the significance of the lives of the Negro people even though those lives are couched in national forms, then the meaning of the lives of the Negro people will remain obscure even to themselves. One of the great tasks of Negro writers of the future will be to show the Negro to himself; it will be, paraphrasing the language of James Joyce, to forge in the smithy of our souls the uncreated conscience of our race.

4. Social Consciousness and the New Responsibility

Naturally, all of this places upon Negro writers who seek to function within their race as successful

naturally, all of this places upon Negro writers, who seek to function within their race as purposeful agents, a new and fearful responsibility. In order to do justice to their subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed and complex consciousness is necessary, a consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people, and moulds this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today.

Every short story, novel, poem, and play should carry within its lines, implied or explicit, a sense of the oppression of the Negro people, the danger of war, of fascism, of the threatened destruction of culture and civilization; and, too, the faith and necessity to build a new world.

With the gradual decline of the moral authority of the Negro church, and the increasing irresolution which is paralyzing Negro middle-class leadership, there is devolving upon Negro writers this new role. They are being called upon to do no less than create values by which their race is to struggle, live and die. They are being called upon to furnish moral sanctions for action, to give a meaning to blighted lives, and to supply motives for mass movements of millions of people.

By their ability to fuse and make articulate the experience of men, because their art possesses the cunning to steal into the inmost recesses of the human heart, because they can create the myths and symbols that inspire a faith in life, they may expect to either to be consigned to oblivion by the silent judgment of workers who ignore their writing, or to be recognized for the valued agents that they are.

For the creation of a vigorous and forthright literature, the historical tide is running with Negro writers today. Electric and basic changes in social and economic conditions foreshadow commensurate changes in the arts. Since the World War a great many disturbances have broken the slumber of the Negro people. The period of migration, the boom, the Depression, the struggle for unionism, all these have created conditions which should complement the rise of a school of expression. The millions whose lives have been touched or moulded by these forces constitute an audience. The question no longer is will they respond, but can the need be filled. They are hungry for food of more than one kind.

This mandate, and it is nothing than that, raises the inescapable question of the personality of the writer. It means that in the lives of Negro writers must be found those materials and experiences which will create in them a meaningful and significant picture of the world today. Many young writers have grown to believe that a Marxist analysis of society presents such a picture. It creates a picture which, when placed squarely before the eyes of the writer, should unify his personality, organize his emotions, and buttress him with a tense and obdurate will to change the world.

And yet, for the writer, Marxism is but the starting point. No theory of life can take the place of life.

After Marxism has laid bare the skeleton of society, there remains the task of the writer to plant flesh upon those bones out of the plenitude of his will to live. He may, with disgust and revulsion, say no and depict the horrors of capitalism encroaching upon the human being. Or he may, with hope and passion, say yes and depict the faint stirrings of a new and emerging life.

But in whatever social voice he chooses to speak, whether positive or negative, there should always be heard or overheard his faith his necessity. And this faith and necessity should not be simple or rendered in primer-like terms; for the life of the Negro people is not simple as some dyspeptic intellectuals contend. The presentation of their lives, should be simple, yes; but all the complexity, the strangeness, the magic wonder of life that plays like a bright sheen over even the most sordid existence, should be there.

To borrow a phrase from the Russians, it should have a complex simplicity. Eliot, Stein, Joyce, Hemingway, and Anderson; Gorky, Barbusse, Nexo, and Jack London no less than the folklore of the Negro himself form **the heritage of Negro writers**. Every iota of gain in human sensibility and thought

should be ready grist for their mill, no matter how far-fetched they may seem in their immediate implications. It would be a sad brigade of Negro writers who would be afraid of this; and it would be a limited consciousness that could not assimilate these influences.

5. The Problem of Perspective

What vision must Negro writers have before their eyes in order to feel the impelling necessity for an about-face? What angle of sight can show them all the forces of modern society in process, all the lines of economic and political development converging toward a distant point of hope? Must they believe in some “ism”?

They may feel that only dupes believe in “ism”; they may feel with some measure of justification that another commitment means only disillusionment; but any one destitute of a theory about the structure, direction, and meaning of modern society is a lost victim in a world he cannot understand or control.

But even if Negro writers found themselves through some “ism,” how would that influence their writing? Are they being called upon to “preach”? To be “salesmen”? To “prostitute” their art? What is the relationship between “something to believe in” and artistic expression? Must they “sully” themselves? Must they write “propaganda”? No. It is a question of awareness of consciousness; it is, above all, **a question of perspective.**

Perspective is that part of a poem, novel, or play which writers never put directly upon paper, but which is sensed in every line of the work. It is that fixed point in intellectual space where writers stand to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of their people. There are times when they may stand too close and the result is a neglect of important things. Of all the problems faced by writers who as a whole have never allied themselves in act or thought with world movements, perspective is the most difficult of solution. At its best perspective is a pre-conscious assumption, something which writers take for granted, something which they win through their living.

A Spanish writer recently spoke of living in the heights of one’s time. Surely, perspective means just that.

It means that Negro writers must learn to view the life of a Negro living in New York’s Harlem or Chicago’s South Side with the consciousness that one sixth of the earth’s surface belongs to the working class. It means that Negro writers must create in their readers’ minds a relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men who loll in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil.

Perspective is the frame in which the picture is hung; it is the invisible brake or accelerator upon the tempo of a poem; it is that part of a novel that is remembered long after the story is forgotten.

Perspective for Negro writers will come when they have looked and brooded so hard and long upon the harsh lot of their race and compared it with the hopes and struggles of minority peoples everywhere that the cold facts have begun to tell them something.

6. Subject Matter and Theme

Once perspective has been gained, Negro writers face a new landscape of subject matter. Negro politicians and the social forces that shape their characters; Negro leaders and the tactics they employ in satisfying both the masses of their race who long for freedom and the whites who place them in positions of authority; the thousands of juvenile delinquents upon the streets of Chicago’s South Side and New York’s Harlem; the role of sluggish reaction Negro teachers play in moulding the minds of the young; Negro

women who carry the triple burden of their sex, of their race, and of their class; the maneuverings of that vulture breed called the Negro lawyer; the strange doings of that sainted devil, the Negro preacher; the two million black John Does who trekked North in 1917; the battled thoughts of that Negro woman social worker who works in the slum areas of her race; and that sixteen-year-old Negro girl reading the *True Story Magazine*; all constitute a landscaping teeming with questions and meaning.

If this is the Negro writers' subject matter, then it must be marshaled toward some goal, some critique; it must be linked with the imaginative representations of the rest of mankind. Negro writing must be placed somewhere in historical space and time; in short, it must have a theme.

This does not mean that Negro writers' sole concern must be with rendering the social scene; but if their conception of the life of their people is broad and deep enough, if the sense of the whole life they are seeking is vivid and strong in them, then their writing will embrace all these social forms under which the life of their people is manifest.

And in speaking of theme, one must necessarily be general and abstract; the temperament of each writer moulds and colors the world he sees. Any one theme may be approached from a thousand angles, with no limit to technical and stylistic freedom. But at the core of the life of a people is one theme, one historic sense of life, one prismatic consciousness refracting aesthetic effort in a whirlwind of color.

Negro writers spring from a family, a clan, a class, and a nation; and the social units in which they are bound have a story, a record. Sense of theme will emerge in Negro writing when Negro writers try to fix this story about some pole of meaning, remembering as they do so that in the creative process meaning proceeds equally as much from the contemplation of the subject matter as from the hopes and apprehensions that rage in the heart of the writer.

Reduced to its simplest and most general terms, theme for Negro writers will rise from their understanding of their being transplanted from a "savage" to a "civilized" culture in all of its social, political, economic, and emotional aspects. It means that Negro writers must have in their consciousness the foreshortened picture of the whole nourishing culture from which they were torn in Africa, and the long, complex (and for the most part unconscious) struggle to regain in some form and under alien conditions of life a whole culture again.

And not only does this mean that they must have this picture, but also a knowledge of the social and emotional milieu that give it tone and solidity of detail. Theme for Negro writers will emerge when they have begun to feel the meaning of the history of their race as though they in one lifetime had lived it themselves throughout all the long centuries.

7. The Problem of Judgment and Criticism

As can be seen from the Negro writer's subject matter and theme, his rebellion will be not only against the exploiting whites, but against all of that within his own race that retards decisive action and obscures clarity of vision. And his loyalties will be toward all those forces which help to shape the consciousness of his race toward a more heroic cast. His will be the task to arrange into significant artistic patterns all the experiences of his people, those experiences which converge toward death as well as those that converge toward life, and stamp them with his judgment of hate or love.

Hitherto, a cowardly sentimentality has deterred Negro writers from launching crusades against the evils which Negro ignorance and stupidity have spawned. Negro writers should not hesitate to tell the truth about their people for fear of harming them, or for fear that these truths may be used by belligerent whites against them. The problem of judgment for Negro writers is bound up with the problem of their becoming

whole men, human beings.

There is but one searchlight that can help Negro writers to walk along this rocky ledge, and that is **the pitiless glare of a criticism** whose frame of reference is historical, political, and economic as well as aesthetic. Over and above all their achievements, Negro writers should never feel that their goal has been reached; always ahead should be the sense of areas of experience to be conquered; problems to be framed, pondered and solved; always in them should reside the sense of becoming. And out of this sense will, should, grow the need for criticism.

Only when Negro writing is bathed in the **white light of a constant and responsible criticism** and only when that criticism has become the conscience of Negro writing, can it be said that Negro writing has come of age.

8. Autonomy of Craft

To depict this new reality, to address this new audience, requires a great discipline and consciousness than was necessary for the so-called Harlem School* of expression. Not only is the subject matter dealt with far more complex and meaningful, but the new role of the writer is qualitatively different. The Negro writers' new position calls for a sharper definition of the status of craft, and a sharper emphasis upon its functional autonomy.

Writers should seek through the medium of their craft to play as meaningful a role in the affairs of men as do other professionals. The limitations of the craft constitute some of its greatest virtues. And if the sensory vehicle of imaginative writing is made to carry too great a load of didactic material, the artistic sense is lost. And if imaginative writing is required to perform the social office of other professionals, then the autonomy of craft is submerged and writing fused detrimentally with other interests.

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. Image and emotion possess a logic of their own. A too literal translation of experience into images is a defeat for imaginative expression. And a vulgarized simplicity constitutes the greatest danger in tracing the reciprocal interplay between the writer and his environment. Like medicine and engineering, writing has its professional autonomy (not absolute independence). Writing should complement other professions, but not supplant them.

9. The Necessity for Collective Work

It goes without saying that these things cannot be gained by Negro writers if their present mode of isolated writing continues. This isolation exists among Negro writers as well as between Negro and white writers. The Negro writers' lack of thorough integration with the American scene, their lack of a clear realization among themselves of their role, have bred a whole generation of embittered and defeated literati.

This isolation is not a voluntary thing as would appear at first sight, and it is not something which Negro writers ultimately wish. Barred for decades from the theater and publishing houses, they have been made to feel a sense of difference. Their unspoken wish for isolated working and living—though they verbally deny this!—is but the reflex of the whole special way of life that has been forced upon them.

The problem by its very nature, is one which must be approached contemporaneously from two points of view. The ideological unity of Negro writers and the alliance of that unity with all the progressive ideas of their day is the primary prerequisite for collective work. On the shoulders of white writers and Negro writers rests the responsibility for ending this mistrust and isolation.

By placing cultural health above narrow sectional prejudices, **liberal white writers** can help to break the stony soil of aggrandizement out of which the stunted plants of Negro nationalism grow. And the Negro writer can help to weed out these choking growths of reactionary nationalism and replace them with hardier and sturdier types of vegetation.

These things are imperative in light of the fact that we live in an age when the majority of the most basic assumptions of life can no longer be taken for granted. Tradition is no longer a guide. The world has grown huge and cold. And time has come to ask questions, to theorize, to speculate, to wonder out what materials can a human world be built.

Each step along this unknown path should be taken with thought, care, self-consciousness, and deliberation. And when Negro writers think that they have arrived at something which smacks of truth, humanity, they should test with others, feel it with others. They should want to feel it with a degree of passion and strength that will enable them to communicate it to millions who are groping like themselves.

To recapitulate: We are writers of a minority people whose working class is pushing militantly forward. We have the choice of writing for Negro and white "Society" or for our working class and the cause of social justice it represents. If we choose to stand on the side of social progress, then our artistic expression must shape the (folk-national) aspirations of our people. This necessitates a basic realignment, ideologically and aesthetically, on our part.

It calls for a new consciousness and a new responsibility. Negro writers must live on the heights of their time and weave their subject matter into artistic patterns and suffuse these patterns with their will to live. Their resurgence against the bulwarks that stand in from of them might necessitate a resurgence against those obstacles within their own group which retard them.

Writers faced with such tremendous tasks can have no possible time for malice and jealousy. The conditions for the growth of each writer depend too much upon the good work of other writers. Every first-rate novel, poem, or plays lifts the level of consciousness higher. When we start, we start from the beginning, but from the height reached by the last aspirant. Every contribution fertilizes the soil out of which we as writers grow. We need one another.

Richard Wright 1937

* Harlem Renaissance

A shorter version of this essay appeared in the fall issue of a magazine called *New Challenge* in 1937. This version is a much longer development of the original one and it is being published for the first time.

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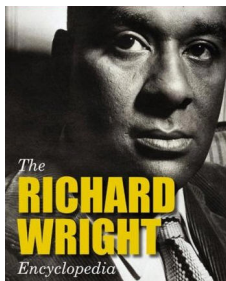
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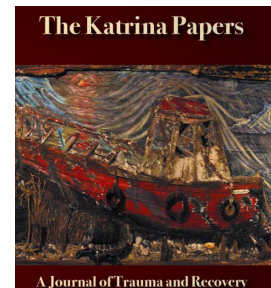
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Herb Boyd, Thomas Bradshaw, Charles Edison and Major Owens discuss how current events are reflected in the writings of African Americans. The event is at the Medgar Evers College at the City University of New York. [C-Span Archives](#)

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[The Katrina Papers, by Jerry W. Ward, Jr. \\$18.95](#) / [The Richard Wright Encyclopedia \(2008\)](#)



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[The Katrina Papers](#) is not your average memoir. It is a fusion of many kinds of writing, including intellectual autobiography, personal narrative, political/cultural analysis, spiritual journal, literary history, and poetry. Though it is the record of one man's experience of Hurricane Katrina, it is a record that is fully a part of his life and work as a scholar, political activist, and professor. [The Katrina Papers](#) provides space not only for the traumatic events but also for ruminations on authors such as Richard Wright and theorists like Deleuze and Guattari. The result is a complex though thoroughly accessible book. The struggle with form—the search for a medium proper to the complex social, personal, and political ramifications of an event unprecedented in this scholar's life and in American social history—lies at the very heart of [The Katrina Papers](#). It depicts an enigmatic and multi-stranded world view which takes the local as its nexus for understanding the global. It resists the temptation to simplify or clarify when simplification and clarification are not possible. Ward's narrative is, at times, very direct, but he always refuses to simplify the complex emotional and spiritual volatility of the process and the historical moment that he is witnessing. The end result is an honesty that is both pedagogical and inspiring.—Hank Lazer

[The Richard Wright Encyclopedia \(2008\)](#) is a marvelous resource! It's not like any encyclopedia I've seen before. Already, I have spent hours reading through the various entries. So much is there: people, themes, issues, events, bibliographies, etc.. related to Wright. Yours is a monumental contribution! The more I read

Wright (and about him), the more I am amazed at the depth and breadth of his work and its impact on the worlds of literature, philosophy, politics, sociology, history, psychology, etc. He was formidable! [Floyd W. Hayes](#)

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