

and the following year he won a Harmon Foundation award for *The Schooner*. From 1927 to 1932, he lived in Paris, where he studied privately with an instructor at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. After returning to the United States in 1932, he benefited from commissions from the WPA, as did his contemporaries Aaron Douglas and Sargent Johnson (pp. 464 and 465). Despite his academic training and immersion in European artistic traditions,

Hayden intentionally adopted a “naive” folk style. He drew on folk themes and included African images in some of his work, such as *Fétiche et Fleurs*, a still life featuring Gambonese mask and Zairean textile, for which he won a second Harmon Foundation award in 1933. Hayden’s work from the 1930s, including *Midsummer Night in Harlem*, made him a controversial figure due to his use of forms and themes that evoke black racial stereotypes.

Harmon Collection, National Archives.

IN THE HEADLINES:

Reconciling the Protest School of Richard Wright and the Modernist Individual of Zora Neale Hurston

ZORA NEALE HURSTON: *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* [1928]

RICHARD WRIGHT: *Blueprint for Negro Writing* [1937]

RICHARD WRIGHT: *Between Laughter and Tears: A Review of Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God** [1937]

ZORA NEALE HURSTON: *Stories of Conflict: A Review of Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children** [1938]

Do African American artists have an obligation to contribute to a collective political vision—or is the pursuit of an individual vision an equally valid undertaking? Are some styles or themes more appropriate than others for black artists? During the late 1930s, the work of two groundbreaking writers, Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston, became identified with divergent answers to these questions about the relationship of artistic expression to politics.

Contemporary critics recognize Wright and Hurston as foundational figures in the African American literary tradition. Assessing their work as complementary rather than antithetical to each other is a relatively recent phenomenon, however, fueled by such work as June Jordan’s 1974 essay “On Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston: Notes toward a Balancing of Love and Hatred” (p. 720). The prior tendency to regard the two writers as oppositional has its roots not only in the choices they made in their fiction but also in the ways they presented themselves and their ideas on African American writing.

Certainly, fundamental differences divide their work, particularly as reflected in their best-known novels, Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) and Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). On the broadest level of

function, *Native Son* is a prototypical novel of protest, while *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a quintessential work of affirmation. The difference is underscored by the hostile, interracial, urban world of *Native Son* and the relatively nurturing southern, black, rural environment of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Wright’s novel also explores the concept of synecdoche, where, in this case, a person is used to represent a group, while Hurston’s novel portrays characters as distinctive individuals.

Wright’s and Hurston’s critical writing contributed to the idea that their artistic and political choices required choosing one artistic vision over the other. “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” Wright’s sets of rules to guide the development of political writers, contrasts markedly with Hurston’s self-presentation as an independent writer in her 1928 essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” Interestingly, even though Wright champions art grounded in Marxism, he rejects the idea of propaganda, arguing for a balance between art and politics.

When *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published, in 1937, Wright gave it a highly critical review. To Wright, Hurston’s focus on relationships among black people was an avoidance of the primary political imperative of the day, which called for representations of

conflicts between black people and the dominant white world. Hurston repaid Wright when she reviewed his *Uncle Tom's Children* in April 1938. Her dismissal of the work as "a book about hatreds" contributed to the growing perception of their work as dichotomous.

Wright's and Hurston's positions on art, racism, and the role of the audience raise a number of questions about different types of artistic production—for example: Are experiences of discrimination aberrations or the norm? (Incidents of racism "astonish" Hurston, while Wright sees them as dominant factors in shaping black lives.) Is art a route to wholeness, or is wholeness a given for an artist? (Wright presents art as a way for African Americans, having been "torn" from Africa, to become whole again, while Hurston begins with the premise that she is already whole.) Finally, what is the dominant force in shaping the type of art that is produced and consumed? Is it the artist, as Hurston believed, or the audience, as Wright believed? Is there a target audience, and is that audience white or black? If black, is it "the black bourgeoisie" or "the black masses"?

Exploring the contrasts between Hurston's and Wright's works illuminates key aspects of their writing and political frameworks. At the same time, later critics such as June Jordan (p. 720) offer an alternative to the traditional focus on the differences between their artistic visions.

Zora Neale Hurston claimed different birth dates throughout her life, ranging from 1898 to 1910, but scholars have recently determined that she was born on January 15, 1891 in Notasulga, Alabama. The next year, her family moved to Eatonville, Florida, the first incorporated black community in America, where her father, a Baptist minister and politician, later served as mayor. As a young woman, Hurston worked as a domestic. She didn't attend high school until she was 26, but then went on to study at Howard University, where she began publishing short stories, including "Spunk," published in *Opportunity*. Transferring to Barnard in New York City, she became a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance movement. Her study of anthropology with Frank Boas took her to the American South (and later Jamaica and Haiti) where she collected black folklore, a rich body of material that informed both her non-fiction and fiction writing. Her publications include *Mules and Men* (1935, on voodoo practice and black rural culture), an autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) and four novels, the second being *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). During her later years, out of step with the poli-

tics of the emerging civil rights movement, Hurston descended into obscurity and poverty, supporting herself as a domestic while working on a final novel, *Herod the Great*. She died penniless in a Florida welfare home on January 28, 1960. Her belongings were ordered burned following her death, but a sheriff who knew her intervened and extinguished the fire, saving many of her manuscripts and photographs.

Richard Wright was born in 1908 in Roxie, Mississippi. His early schooling was repeatedly interrupted by family upheaval (his father left the family when he was a child), by frequent moves (among different households in different towns and even an orphanage), and by the need for him to earn money to help support his brother and mother. Still, when he was fifteen, he managed to write and publish his first short story ("The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre"), and the next year he graduated as valedictorian of his ninth grade class. Moving to Chicago in 1927, he found work as a postal clerk among other jobs, and continued to study writing on his own by reading extensively. He became involved with the John Reed Club, a Marxist group of artists and intellectuals, and eventually joined the Communist Party in 1933. He published poems in *New Masses* and other periodicals while working on his first novel, *Cesspool* (published in 1963 as *Lawd Today*). After conflicts with Communist leaders in Chicago over racial and artistic issues, Wright moved to New York in 1937, where he worked on the WPA Writers' Project and also wrote for the *Daily Worker*. He gained national attention as a writer when he won first prize in *Story* magazine's literary contest for his first collection of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*, published in 1938. In 1939, he won a Guggenheim Fellowship and the next year, he published his first novel *Native Son*, which became the first book by an African American author to be selected by the Book of the Month Club. After a short-lived marriage to the Russian ballet dancer Dhimah Rose Meadman in 1938 (with writer Ralph Ellison as the best man), Wright married the white American communist activist Ellen Poplar in 1941, with whom he later had two children. Wright was awarded the Spingarn Medal from the NAACP in 1941. He left the Communist Party in 1942, then publicly criticized his experiences within the party in the 1944 article "I Tried to Be a Communist." The following year, he published *Black Boy*, the first part of his autobiography (the second part was published posthumously as *American Hunger* in 1977). In 1946, Wright immigrated to Paris, France, where he became involved with leading

existentialist writers, including Jean-Paul Sartre. He continued to publish books (though none met with the success of his earlier works), to travel and to engage

with political causes until his death from a heart attack in 1960 at the age of 52.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

How It Feels to Be Colored Me [1928]

I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother's side was *not* an Indian chief.

I remember the very day that I became colored. Up to my thirteenth year. I lived in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida. It is exclusively a colored town. The only white people I knew passed through the town going to or coming from Orlando. The native whites rode dusty horses, the Northern tourists chugged down the sandy village road in automobiles. The town knew the Southerners and never stopped cane chewing when they passed. But the Northerners were something else again. They were peered at cautiously from behind curtains by the timid. The more venturesome would come out on the porch to watch them go past and got just as much pleasure out of the tourists as the tourists got out of the village.

The front porch might seem a daring place for the rest of the town, but it was a gallery seat for me. My favorite place was atop the gate-post. Proscenium box¹ for a born first-nighter. Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn't mind the actors knowing that I liked it. I usually spoke to them in passing. I'd wave at them and when they returned my salute, I would say something like this: "Howdy-do-well-I-thank-you-where-you-goin?" Usually automobile or the horse paused at this, and after a queer exchange of compliments, I would probably "go a piece of the way" with them, as we say in farthest Florida. If one of my family happened to come to the front in time to help me, of course negotiations would be rudely broken off. But even so, it is clear that I was the first "welcome-to-our-state" Floridian,

and I hope the Miami Chamber of Commerce will please take notice.

During this period, white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there. They liked to hear me "speak pieces" and sing and wanted to see me dance the parse-me-la and gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things, which seemed strange to me for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop. Only they didn't know it. The colored people gave no dimes. They deplored any joyful tendencies in me, but I was their Zora nevertheless. I belonged to them, to the nearby hotels, to the county—everybody's Zora.

But changes came in the family when I was thirteen, and I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left Eatonville, the town of the oleanders, as Zora. When I disembarked from the river-boat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl. I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast² brown—warranted not to rub nor run.

But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.³

Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past.

1. Theater box seats on each side of and closest to the stage.

2. Colorfast.

3. Reference to Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* 2.2.3–4: "Why, then the world's mine oyster, / Which I with sword will open."

The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you. The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said "On the line!" The Reconstruction said "Get set!": and the generation before said "Go!" I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me. It is a bully adventure and worth all that I have paid through my ancestors for it. No one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory. The world to be won and nothing to be lost. It is thrilling to think—to know that for any act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame. It is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep.

The position of my white neighbor is much more difficult. No brown specter pulls up a chair beside me when I sit down to eat. No dark ghost thrusts its leg against mine in bed. The game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the game of getting.

I do not always feel colored. Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira.⁴ I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.

For instance at Barnard. "Beside the waters of the Hudson" I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.

Sometimes it is the other way around. A white person is set down in our midst, but the contrast is just as sharp for me. For instance, when I sit in the drafty basement that is The New World Cabaret with a white person, my color comes. We enter chatting about any little nothing that we have in common and are seated by the jazz waiters. In the abrupt way that jazz orchestras have, this one plunges into a number. It loses no time in circumlocutions, but gets right down to business. It constricts the thorax and splits the heart with its tempo and narcotic harmonies. This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it

until it breaks through to the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen—follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai⁵ above my head, I hurl it true to the mark *yeeeeoooww!* I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something—give pain, give death to what, I do not know. But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back slowly to the veneer we call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly.

"Good music they have here," he remarks, drumming the table with his fingertips.

Music. The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt. He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am *so* colored.

At certain times I have no race, I am *me*. When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library,⁶ for instance. So far as my feelings are concerned, Peggy Hopkins Joyce on the Boule Mich⁷ with her gorgeous raiment, stately carriage, knees knocking together in a most aristocratic manner, has nothing on me. The cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.

I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My country, right or wrong.

Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How *can* any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me.

But in the main, I feel like a brown bag of miscelany propped against a wall. Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red and yellow. Pour out the

4. Allusion to Muhammad's emigration to Medina from Mecca, referring here to Hurston's move from Eatonville to Jacksonville.

5. Spear.

6. The main branch of the New York Public Library.

7. Boulevard Saint-Michel, a major street in the Latin Quarter of Paris; Joyce: white American actress and celebrity (1893–1957).

contents, and there is discovered a jumble of small things priceless and worthless. A first-water diamond,⁸ an empty spool, bits of broken glass, lengths of string, a key to a door long since crumbled away, a rusty knife-blade, old shoes saved for a road that never was and never will be, a nail bent under the weight of things too heavy for any nail, a dried flower or two still a little fragrant. In your hand is the brown bag. On the ground before you in the jumble it held—so much like the jumble in the bags, could they be emptied, that all might be dumped in a single heap and the bags refilled without altering the content of any greatly. A bit of colored glass more or less would not matter. Perhaps that is how the Great Stuffer of Bags filled them in the first place—who knows?

From *The World Tomorrow*, May 1928, p. 215.

RICHARD WRIGHT

Blueprint for Negro Writing [1937]

1. THE ROLE OF NEGRO WRITING: TWO DEFINITIONS

Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went 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. For the most part these artistic ambassadors were received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks.

White America never offered these Negro writers 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 the role Negro writing should play in American culture; and the role it did play grew out of accident rather than intent or design. Either it crept in through the kitchen

in the form of jokes or it was the fruits of that foul soil which was the result of a liaison between inferiority-complexed Negro "geniuses" and burnt-out white Bohemians with money.

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 something 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.

Under these conditions Negro writing assumed two general aspects: (1) It became a sort of conspicuous ornamentation, the hallmark of "achievement." (2) It became the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice.

Rarely was the best of this writing addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his 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.

2. 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 meaningful when it is recalled that oppressed minorities, and especially the 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, chafing under exploitation, forge organizational forms of struggle to better their lot. Lacking the handicaps of false ambition and property, they have access to a wide social vision and a

8. A diamond of the highest quality.

deep social consciousness. They display a greater freedom and initiative in pushing their claims upon civilization than even do the petty bourgeoisie. Their organizations show greater strength, adaptability, and efficiency than any other group or class in society.

That Negro workers, propelled by the harsh conditions of their lives, have demonstrated this consciousness and mobility for economic and political action there can be no doubt. But has this consciousness been reflected in the work of Negro writers to the same degree as it has in the Negro workers' struggle to free Herndon¹ and the Scottsboro Boys, in the drive toward unionism, 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 as time passes the gap widens between them and their people.

How can this hiatus be bridged? How can the enervating effects of this longstanding split be eliminated?

In presenting questions of this sort 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. An emphasis upon tendency and experiment, a view of society 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.

3. A WHOLE CULTURE

There is, however, a culture of the Negro which is his and has been addressed to him 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 folklore of the Negro people.

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 Negroes' struggle for religion on the plantations between 1820-60 assumed the form of a struggle for human rights. It remained a relatively revo-

lutionary struggle until religion began to serve as an antidote for suffering and denial. But even today there are millions of American 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 and complete 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, to confidential wisdom of a black father 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 the last century of striving at expression would have continued and deepened this folk tradition, would have tried to create a more intimate and yet a more profoundly 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, unwritten and unrecognized and the other for the sons and daughters of a rising Negro bourgeoisie, parasitic and mannered.

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

4. THE PROBLEM OF NATIONALISM IN NEGRO WRITING

In stressing the difference between the role Negro writing failed to play in the lives of the Negro people, and the role it should play in the future if it is to serve its historic functions 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 stated that no attempt is being made here to

1. Angelo Herndon (1913-97), union organizer convicted in 1932 in Georgia for insurrection.

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 the absence of fixed and nourishing forms of culture, the Negro has a folklore which embodies the memories and hopes of his struggle for freedom. 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 despair still remain in the fluid state of daily 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 Negro expression, the collective sense of Negro life in America. Let those who shy at the nationalist implications of Negro life look at this 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 a recognition of value in life as it is *lived*, a recognition that marks the emergence of a new culture in the shell of the old. And at the moment this process starts, at the moment when a people begin to realize a *meaning* in their suffering, the civilization that engenders that suffering is doomed.

The nationalist aspects of Negro life are as sharply manifest in the social institutions of 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 deep down, though they express themselves through their institutions and adhere to this special way of life, they do not want it now. This special existence was forced upon them from without by lynch rope, bayonet and mob rule. They accepted these negative conditions with the inevitability of a tree which must live or perish in whatever soil it finds itself.

The few crumbs of American civilization which the Negro has got from the tables of capitalism have been through these segregated channels. Many Negro institutions are cowardly and incompetent; but they are all that the Negro has. And, in the main, any move, whether for progress or reaction, must come through these insti-

tutions 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 attitudes fostered in this warping way of life.

5. THE BASIS AND MEANING OF NATIONALISM IN NEGRO WRITING

The social institutions of the Negro are imprisoned in the Jim Crow political system of the South, and this Jim Crow political system is in turn built upon a plantation-feudal economy. Hence, it can be seen that the emotional expression of group-feeling which puzzles so many whites and leads them to deplore what they call "black chauvinism" is not a morbidly inherent trait of the Negro, but rather 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 origins, its limitations that is aware of the dangers of its position that knows its ultimate 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 purposes of creative expression it means that the Negro writer must realize within the area of his own personal experience those impulses which, when prefigured in terms of broad social movements, constitute the stuff of nationalism.

For Negro writers even more so than for Negro politicians, nationalism is a bewildering and vexing question, the full ramifications of which cannot be dealt with here. But among 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 the revolutionary significance

of these nationalist tendencies, must of necessity do a rank injustice to the Negro people and alienate their possible allies in the struggle for freedom.

6. SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND RESPONSIBILITY

The Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility. In order to do justice to his 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.

With the gradual decline of the moral authority of the Negro church, and with the increasing irresolution which is paralyzing Negro middle class leadership, a new role is devolving upon the Negro writer. He is being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die.

By his ability to fuse and make articulate the experiences of men, because his writing possesses the potential cunning to steal into the inmost recesses of the human heart, because he can create the myths and symbols that inspire a faith in life, he may expect either to be consigned to oblivion, or to be recognized for the valued agent he is.

This raises the 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 a meaningful 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 before the eyes of the writer, should unify his personality, organize his emotions, buttress him with a tense and obdurate will to change the world.

And, in turn, this changed world will dialectically change the writer. Hence, it is through a Marxist conception of reality and society that the maximum degree

of freedom in thought and feeling can be gained for the Negro writer. Further, this dramatic Marxist vision, when consciously grasped, endows the writer with a sense of dignity which no other vision can give. Ultimately, it restores to the writer his lost heritage, that is, his role as a creator of the world in which he lives, and as a creator of himself.

Yet, for the Negro 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 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 *over-heard* his faith, his necessity, his judgement.

His vision need not be simple or rendered in primer-like terms; for the life of the Negro people is not simple. 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 the most sordid existence, should be there. To borrow a phrase from the Russians, it should have a *complex simplicity*. Eliot, Stein, Joyce, Proust, Hemingway, and Anderson, Gorky, Barbusse, Nexø, and Jack London² no less than the folklore of the Negro himself should form the heritage of the Negro writer. Every iota of gain in human thought and sensibility should be ready grist for his mill, no matter how far-fetched they may seem in their immediate implications.

7. 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 vision can show them all the forces of modern society in process, all the lines of economic development converging toward a distant point of hope? Must they believe in some "ism"?

2. White American and European writers T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), Marcel Proust (1871–1922), Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961), Sherwood Anderson (1876–1941), Maxim Gorky (1868–1936), Henri Barbusse (1873–1935), Martin Andersen Nexø (1869–1954), and Jack London (1876–1916).

They may feel that only dupes believe in “isms”; they feel with some measure of justification that another commitment means only another disillusionment. But anyone destitute of a theory about the meaning, structure and direction 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 writing? 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 a writer never puts directly upon paper. It is that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his people. There are times when he may stand too close and the result is a blurred vision. Or he may stand too far away and the result is a neglect of important things.

Of all the problems faced by writers who as a whole have never allied themselves with world movements, perspective is the most difficult of achievement. At its best, perspective is a pre-conscious assumption, something which a writer takes for granted, something which he wins through his living.

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

It means that a Negro writer 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 surface belongs to the working class. It means that a Negro writer must create in his 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 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.

8. THE PROBLEM OF THEME

This does not mean that a Negro writer’s sole concern must be with rendering the social scene; but if his con-

ception of the life of his people is broad and deep enough, if the sense of the *whole* life he is seeking is vivid and strong in him, then his writing will embrace all those social, political, and economic forms under which the life of his people is manifest.

In speaking of theme one must necessarily be general and abstract; the temperament of each writer moulds and colors the world he sees. Negro life may be approached from a thousand angles, with no limit to technical and stylistic freedom.

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 understanding the meaning of their being transplanted from a “savage” to a “civilized” culture in all of its social, political, economic, and emotional implications. 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 of 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.

It is not only this picture they must have, but also a knowledge of the social and emotional milieu that gives 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 life time had lived it themselves throughout all the long centuries.

9. AUTONOMY OF CRAFT

For the Negro writer to depict this new reality requires a greater discipline and consciousness than was necessary for the so-called Harlem school of expression. Not only is the subject matter dealt with far more meaningful and complex, but the new role of the writer is qualitatively different. The Negro writers’ new position demands a sharper definition of the status of his

craft, and a sharper emphasis upon its functional autonomy.

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

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 vulgarized simplicity constitutes the greatest danger in tracing the reciprocal interplay between the writer and his environment.

Writing has its professional autonomy; it should complement other professions, but it should not supplant them or be swamped by them.

10. 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 and living 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 possible role, have bred generation after generation of embittered and defeated literati.

Barred for decades from the theater and publishing houses, Negro writers have been made to feel a sense of difference. So deep has this white-hot iron of exclusion been burnt into their hearts that thousands have all but lost the desire to become identified with American civilization. The Negro writers' acceptance of this enforced isolation and their attempt to justify it is but a defense-reflex of the whole special way of life which has been rammed down their throats.

This 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 our day is the primary prerequisite for collective work. On the shoulders of white writers and Negro writers alike rest the responsibility of ending this mistrust and isolation.

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

These tasks are imperative in light of the fact that we live in a time 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. Surely this is the moment to ask questions, to theorize, to speculate, to wonder out of what materials can a human world be built.

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

Writers faced with such tasks can have no possible time for malice or 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 play lifts the level of consciousness higher.

From *New Challenge*, Fall 1937, pp. 53-65.

RICHARD WRIGHT

Between Laughter and Tears:
A Review of Hurston's Their Eyes
Were Watching God [1937]

It is difficult to evaluate Waters Turpin's *These Low Grounds* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This is not because there is an esoteric meaning hidden or implied in either of the two novels;

but rather because neither of the two novels has a basic idea or theme that lends itself to significant interpretation. Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction. With Mr. Turpin the case is different; the desire and motive are present, but his "saga" of four generations of Negro life seems to have been swamped by the subject matter.

These Low Grounds represents, I believe, the first attempt of a Negro writer to encompass in fiction the rise of the Negro from slavery to the present. The greater part of the novel is laid on the eastern shore of Maryland where Carrie, upon the death of her slave mother, is left to grow up in a whorehouse. After several fitful efforts to escape her lot, Carrie finally marries a visiting farmer, Prince, with whom she leads a life of household drudgery. Having helped Prince become the leading Negro farmer in the country, Carrie rebels against his infidelities and domination and, taking her two young daughters, runs away. Years later Prince discovers her and persuades her to return home. As she is about to make the journey, she is murdered by Grundy, her drunken and jealous lover. The two daughters return to the farm; Blanche remains with her father, but Martha flees North to escape the shame of pregnancy when her lover is killed in an accident. Martha's subsequent career on the stage enables her to send her son, Jimmy-Lew, to college to become a teacher. The novel closes with a disillusioned Jimmy-Lew comforted by his wife because of his bitterness over the harsh and unfair conditions of southern life.

The first half of the book is interesting, for Turpin deals with a subject which he knows intimately. Those sections depicting post-war Negro life in the North do not ring true or full; in fact, toward the conclusion the book grows embarrassingly sketchy, resolving nothing.

Oddly enough, Turpin seems to have viewed those parts of his novel which deal with the modern Negro through the eyes and consciousness of one emotionally alien to the scene. Many of the characters—Carrie, Prince, Martha—are splendid social types, but rarely do they become human beings. It seems that Turpin

drew these types from intellectual conviction, but lacked the artistic strength to make us feel the living quality of their experiences. It seems to me, he should strive to avoid the bane of sheer competency. He deals with great characters and a great subject matter; what is lacking is a great theme and a great passion.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is the story of Zora Neale Hurston's Janie who, at sixteen, married a grubbing farmer at the anxious instigation of her slave-born grandmother. The romantic Janie, in the highly-charged language of Miss Hurston, longed to be a pear tree in blossom and have a "dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom, the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace." Restless, she fled from her farmer husband and married Jody, an up-and-coming Negro business man who, in the end, proved to be no better than her first husband. After twenty years of clerking for her self-made Jody, Janie found herself a frustrated widow of forty with a small fortune on her hands. Tea Cake, "from in and through Georgia," drifted along and, despite his youth, Janie took him. For more than two years they lived happily; but Tea Cake was bitten by a mad dog and was infected with rabies. One night in a canine rage Tea Cake tried to murder Janie, thereby forcing her to shoot the only man she had ever loved.

Miss Hurston can write; but her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley.¹ Her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes.

Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the "white folks" laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears.

Turpin's faults as a writer are those of an honest man trying desperately to say something; but Zora Neale Hurston lacks even that excuse. The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no

1. The first African American to publish a book of poems; for more information on Wheatley, see p. 12.

thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits the phase of Negro life which is "quaint," the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the "superior" race.

From *New Masses*, October 5, 1937, pp. 22-25.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

Stories of Conflict: A Review of Wright's Uncle Tom's Children [1938]

This is a book about hatreds. Mr. Wright serves notice by his title that he speaks of people in revolt, and his stories are so grim that the Dismal Swamp of race hatred must be where they live. Not one act of understanding and sympathy comes to pass in the entire work.

But some bright new lines to remember come flashing from the author's pen. Some of his sentences have the shocking-power of a forty-four.¹ That means that he knows his way around among words. With his facility, one wonders what he would have done had he dealt with plots that touched the broader and more fundamental phases of Negro life instead of confining himself to the spectacular. For, though he has handled himself well, numerous Negro writers, published and unpublished, have written of this same kind of incident. It is the favorite Negro theme just as how the stenographer or some other poor girl won the boss or the boss's son is the favorite white theme. What is new in the four novelettes included in Mr. Wright's book is the wish-fulfillment theme. In each story the hero suffers but he gets his man.

In the first story, "Big Boy Leaves Home," the hero, Big Boy, takes the gun away from a white soldier after he has shot two of his chums and kills the white man. His chum is lynched, but Big Boy gets away. In the second story there is a flood on the Mississippi and in a fracas over a stolen rowboat, the hero gets the white owner of the boat and is later shot to death himself. He is a stupid, blundering character, but full of pathos. But then all the characters in this book are elemental and brutish. In the third story, the hero gets the white man most Negro men rail against—the white man who possesses a Negro woman. He gets several of them while he is about the business of choosing to die in a hurricane of bullets and fire because his woman has had a white man. There is lavish killing here, perhaps enough to satisfy all male black readers. In the fourth story neither the hero nor his adversary is killed, but the white foe bites the dust just the same. And in this story is summed up the conclusions that the other three stories have been moving towards.

In the other three stories the reader sees the picture of the South that the communists have been passing around of late. A dismal, hopeless section ruled by brutish hatred and nothing else. Mr. Wright's author's solution, is the solution of the PARTY—state responsibility for everything and individual responsibility for nothing, not even feeding one's self. And march!

Since the author himself is a Negro, his dialect is a puzzling thing. One wonders how he arrived at it. Certainly he does not write by ear unless he is tone-deaf. But aside from the broken speech of his characters, the book contains some beautiful writing. One hopes that Mr. Wright will find in Negro life a vehicle for his talents.

From *The Saturday Review of Literature*, April 2, 1938, p. 32.

1. A type of handgun bullet.