Do You See What I See? Richard Wright, Art, and Politics

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What does it mean to see? I can see the screen I'm typing into, but I can't see what makes it work. What I can see is a physical manifestation of the parts that make up the screen; however, I don't know how these parts came together. Yet, this relationship works just fine for me. I turn the screen on and it works, so there is no reason to concern myself with how it functions. If I were to attempt to look inside it, to take off the cover, I might break it. Why would I chance that? I know what I need to know in order for my relationship to continue with the screen and I'm *good with that*. Similarly, by the 1930s, Jim Crow—both de facto and legislative—had cast its own screen across most of America, affording whites a way to keep blacks in their place, and blacks a way to find their place among whites, and most people were *good with that*. Most people—black or white—had no desire to take off the cover, to see what was behind the screen; however, Richard Wright wasn't afraid to look under the hood. Wright wasn't *good with that*. Wright was willing to pull back the cover and reveal the mechanisms that were precariously holding the social arrangements decreed by Jim Crow in place; but how could he help people see what he saw? He had an art, he could write, and, as Murray Edelman tells us in *From Art to Politics*, "art is the fountainhead from which political discourse, beliefs about politics, and consequent actions ultimately spring" (3). Wright could use his art to promote political change. Through his writing, Wright hoped to define a new and true narrative for blacks that would enable people to *see* the world the way he saw it. Moreover, Wright would do this not just for the benefit of blacks, but for the benefit of American society.

Wright received an education in Jim Crow during his childhood spent in Mississippi and Tennessee. This education was earnestly delivered by whites who continuously reminded him that he and his fellow blacks were held in the same regard as a dog. Through this education, he came to understand that Jim Crow did not make blacks *separate but equal*, it made them s*eparate and powerless*, causing him to wonder, "How do Negroes feel about the way they have to live?" (*The Ethics of Living Jim Crow*). Wright came to wonder if blacks were capable of seeing through the screen that defined their

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