

Thematics of Interracial Violence in Selected Harlem Renaissance Novels

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If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

—Claude McKay, “If We Must Die”

McKay's poem “If We Must Die” (1919) arguably marks the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance because it gives expression to a new racial spirit and self-awareness. Its strong assertion of blackness against the race riots in northern cities following the Great War, particularly the Red Summer of 1919, is a clear indication of the interrelationship between racial violence and counter-violence. The poem expresses the essence of the Harlem Renaissance¹ in terms of the assertiveness of the New Negro, his racial pride, and his militancy against white prejudice regardless of the consequences. According to James Weldon Johnson,

¹It was alternatively called the Negro Renaissance or the New Negro Movement.

McKay “pours out the bitterness and rebellion in his heart” in this tragic sonnet “in a manner that strikes horror.” But Johnson also writes that McKay’s poetry “gives evidence that he has passed beyond the danger which threatens many of the new Negro poets—the danger of allowing the purely polemical phases of the race problem to choke their sense of artistry” (*Book of American Negro Poetry*). Johnson, hence, articulates what McKay achieves in this poem: a protest message delivered aesthetically via the conventional sonnet form.

As early as 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* was paving the way for the radical spirit of the movement when he rejected the old school of Negro thought, represented by Booker T. Washington, for its accommodation, submission, and acceptance of intellectual inferiority.² The New Negro Du Bois favored is proud, progressive, and above all militant in self-defense. Those Negroes who fought in World War I for democracy and left the racially hostile South to succeed in Northern cities became more self-assertive with a renewed sense of their manliness—thus embodying the ideals already posited by Du Bois regarding the new negro mentality. They demanded rights and refused to turn the other cheek for a slap. In the domain of literary politics, Du Bois found an art devoid of politics advancing racial equality meaningless. He wanted art to be revolutionary. He thought blacks could achieve through culture what could not be achieved through actual violence or weapons.

In his canonical introduction to the anthology *The New Negro* (1925), Alain Locke also captures the essence of the change from the Old to the New Negro and the radical politics of the movement: “The American mind must reckon with a fundamentally changed Negro” (8). Locke speaks of “renewed self-respect and self-dependence” (4). The younger generation, he argues, “is vi-

²Specifically in “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others” in this book, 42-54, Du Bois articulates his differences from Washington and spells out an ideological split within Negro leadership.

brant with a new psychology; the new spirit is awake in the masses” (3). Unlike the New Negro, the Old Negro was “a stock figure” and “more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down,’ or ‘in his place,’ or ‘helped up,’ to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden” (3). Hence, the New Negro, in refusing to be held down, was different and militant, at least culturally. The call for retaliatory violence against whites in McKay’s poem marks the rhetoric of interracial violence, mainly carried out by men against men, which will be the focus of this argument. Moreover, Locke and Du Bois pave the cultural atmosphere for a textual form of violence within Harlem Renaissance literary productions and within the radical orientation of the movement. Significantly, the physical violence presented in Harlem Renaissance novels and its direct emotional impact are distinct from the indirect emotional impact felt by the witnesses of such violence.

Within a radical scheme, the depiction of violence in propagandistic novels was seen as part of a cultural fight for civil rights. Du Bois in his 1926 “Criteria of Negro Art” attacks many of the younger writers for failing to adhere to their political responsibility by writing positive racial propaganda. He famously claims,

Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I don’t care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. (22)

He asserts that more focus should be given to the political responsibilities of the black writer because the duty of defending the race should precede the value of art for art’s sake. For Du Bois, Negro art can be part of a radical fight for racial advancement. Blacks are capable of producing beautiful art,

but the point today is that until the art of the black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human. And when through art they compel

recognition then let the world discover if it will that their art is as new as it is old and as old as new. (23)

Du Bois establishes a radical aspect about black literary politics that is congruent with the militant orientation of the New Negro movement. He is the starting point for the propagandistic depiction of interracial violence this article will elaborate and distinguish from the aesthetic depiction of this violence.

Discussing Afro-American discourse between 1895 and 1925, Henry Gates argues that “In the years immediately after World War I, the trope of the New Negro took on militant political connotations.” Gates speaks of the New Negro’s “postwar connotations of aggressive self-defense.” For Gates, however, “the name has implied a tension between strictly political concerns and strictly artistic concerns.” Gates suggests that the Harlem Renaissance was not as militant as McKay’s poem would suggest: “With the Harlem Renaissance the New Negro became an apolitical movement of the arts.” According to Gates, Alain Locke’s New Negro “transformed the militancy associated with the trope and translated this into an apolitical movement of the arts.” This means that there is a supposed shift within Harlem Renaissance politics from political action or protest poetry to the realm of arts and aesthetics. As Barbara Foley claims, “the New Negro class struggle warrior of 1919 reemerge[d] as the cultural hero of the Harlem Renaissance” (*Spectres* 71).

Although one might disagree with interpretations by both Foley and Gates, a certain shift in the conception of the New Negro definitely took place over the years. Such a shift from radicalism to culturalism, or rather their overlap, is at the heart of the treatment of violence in many novels relevant to the discussion. Alternatively put, a reading of Harlem Renaissance novels should take into account that such novels ultimately remain within the realm of literature rather than political action. They are works of art and not political documents per se. However, their political thrust, as best manifested in their treatment of

violence, hovers between explicit and implicit propaganda, i.e. covert and overt aesthetics.

Frantz Fanon’s study of national liberation, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), sheds light on interracial violence within the context of decolonization, but it is still useful here as a background model for its import on racial confrontations and the effects of racial oppression, physical or mental. According to Fanon, decolonization is always “a violent event” (1). Colonial encounters are first “colored by violence” because violence on the part of the colonist brings about the “greater violence” of the colonized (2, 23). Fanon asserts that violence strongly marks the colonial world and colonial relations because of economic, social, and cultural reasons in addition to feelings of internalized racism and inferiority on the part of the colonized. Hence, the subversion of power structures that this violence caused by oppression effects is so dramatic that the “last shall be first” (2). Fanon advocates violence as a means of liberation and a cathartic force. Racism impacts the psychology of the colonized, and a violent decolonization is thus a cathartic release, “a cleansing force” that rids the oppressed of their “inferiority complex” and restores their “self-confidence” (51). For Fanon, the revolutionary colonized group is “the peasantry” as it “has nothing to lose and everything to gain” (23). Fanon sees that the low class of working men and peasants, the proletariat, has no connections with the colonists and is, therefore, free from them and able to conduct a successful revolution. Violence unifies and liberates such a class (44, 51).

Fanon’s model is good for understanding the black psyche and the dynamics of interracial violence in the African American literature of the Harlem Renaissance. We will see that the physical violence of lynching, raping, and murdering necessitates counter-violence; that oppression and internalized racism—as examples of emotional violence—are often direct instigators of counter-violence or violence as self-defense; that the oppressed black men turn violent against each other; and that the newly emerging

revolutionary group objecting to violence and militantly fighting back is “the New Negro.” Moreover, Fanon poses violence as an existential given due to colonial encounters, interracial violence in the novels cited here is also an existentially inevitable racial clash. The broader naturalistic/existential dimensions of the depiction of violence and the political agenda, or lack thereof, behind the depicted violence should be explored. In the following section, a distinction is made between emotional and physical violence and between aesthetics and propaganda as different trajectories/ends for Harlem Renaissance novels depicting interracial violence.

THEMATICS AND TRAJECTORIES OF INTERRACIAL VIOLENCE:
AESTHETICIZED VIOLENCE/COVERT PROPAGANDA

An early example of a Harlem Renaissance novel that tackled violence both in its gruesome physicality and emotional impact is James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, published anonymously in 1912 and then republished under Johnson’s name during the height of the Harlem Renaissance in 1927. What makes the narrator of Johnson’s novel leave his race and the South and move to New York after witnessing the lynching of a black man is “shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals. For certainly the law would restrain and punish the malicious burning alive of animals” (191). Racism and its violent manifestation in the act of lynching devastate the narrator’s psyche and feelings. They dehumanize both victim and viewer. Racism in a society that prefers whiteness causes psychological damage and emotional violence. In the narrator’s small town in the South, a black man is to be lynched. The narrator goes out to see the ritualistic lynching featuring armed men with kerosene lamps and attending women and children (185-86). The emotional impact of what the narrator sees next creates for him a life-changing experience. The “poor wretch”

to be lynched is dumbfounded as he is brought to the railroad station to be burned, apparently for a sexual assault. He is totally robbed of his human dignity: “There he stood, a man only in form and stature, every sign of degeneracy stamped upon his countenance. His eyes were dull and vacant, indicating not a single ray of thought” (186-87). He is then burned alive, like a dumb beast, unable to reason because of fear. While the crowds get gradually excited, he “squirmed, he writhed, strained at his chains, then gave out cries and groans that I shall always hear” (187). Hence, the focus shifts from the physical agony of the lynched victim to the emotional impact left on the narrator, which makes the potential protest message twofold: denouncing the act itself and its impact on the narrator’s psyche.

It is also significant that the narrator does not know this victim of lynching, which highlights more the symbolic nature of lynching by making the victim an “everyman” and the act itself something any black man can be susceptible to. This lynching is covered in very few pages while as a memory and a consequence it lives with the narrator for the rest of his life. It shatters his hopes for better race relations and his belief in his own race. Its symbolic nature makes him view the race problem in a new light, for he himself is not safe and is treading a dangerous terrain in the racially hostile South. As Jonathan Markovitz argues, lynching “was always intended as a metaphor for, or a way to understand, race relations” (xvi). Lynching, the narrator comes to understand, is a “metaphor” for racism and an enactment of a bitter reality he was unfamiliar with in his middle-class life of reading books and playing music. It is used a constant threat of actual death or implemented for socioeconomic reasons. It is no wonder then that the narrator feels “humiliation and shame” at what he saw (Johnson, *Ex-Colored Man* 187). It is shame for belonging to such a despised race, to his country. Hence, the light-skinned narrator decides to desert his black race and his ambitions of composing classical music based on folk themes and goes north to marry a white woman and live as a white

businessman. The narrator is never content, however, in his new life of passing. He regrets having had to sell his birthright as a black man and feels he is leading an unauthentic life, even if a prosperous one.

What does Johnson accomplish in relating this formative incident of lynching in the narrator's life and is he protesting against the practice or using it imaginatively to add a significant twist to his narrative? In his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), Johnson wrote,

The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked down upon by the world as distinctly inferior.

Based on such a statement, we can argue that he was not predominantly polemical in his presentation of race relations. It seems here that he valued artistic merits more than racial polemics. Jerry Bryant argues that “[a]lthough Johnson’s depiction of the lynching does argue strongly against the general practice, he presents it not in order to make that argument but to make a decisive event in the narrator’s life” (122). Bryant continues, saying that lynching became “an aesthetic or technical issue rather than a polemical one” (128) and that the Harlem Renaissance writers turned to “a self-conscious literariness” (127). The idea is not to plea for justice or to condemn injustice but to present “portraits of black life” (127) or “metafictional comments on the literary process itself” (128). Bryant concludes that Johnson’s lynching scene is not a preoccupation with “politics or propaganda” (129), which is relatively true as the lynching is the only direct yet brief treatment of physical and emotional violence in the text. It is incorporated to show how lynching can disrupt race pride and ambition and make one change one’s life course. But isn’t this message in itself one of protest? Propaganda and/or aesthetics do not necessarily exclude each other. When the novel was originally published in 1912, racial violence in the South

was still a strong presence, not something to be romanticized. And the emotional impact of violence on the psyche of the narrator is not a slight protest against the practice. If lynching in the novel is enough to halt the narrator’s dreams of becoming through musical contributions a race man, a “talented tenth” in Du Bois’s terms, then it is absolutely denounced, at least in proportion to its coverage and presence in the novel. Moreover, the narrator keeps feeling guilty and unfulfilled for deserting his race right to the end of the novel, which is a moral, didactic message against the violence of lynching, be it physical or emotional. Johnson wrote in his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* that the colored poet in America faces huge challenges: “The pressure upon him to be propagandic is well nigh irresistible. These conditions are suffocating to breadth and to real art in poetry.” He does articulate a problematic relationship between the needs of art and those of propaganda. It is natural that a work would lean more towards either direction.

In Jean Toomer’s experimental work *Cane* (1923),³ the early stories about women deal lyrically with sexual violence and miscegenation. The violence depicted here is typical of life in the South with its legacy of slavery, displacement, and segregation. However, it is not necessarily interracial. Black men, women, infants, and animals are also objects of this violence. Racism, lynching, and sexual violence are deeply rooted in the history of southern life and color all its aspects. “Karintha” is a growing black beauty who is sexually exploited and thus emotionally abused by irresponsible men around her. However, “[t]his interest of the male, who wishes to ripen a growing thing too soon, could mean no good to her” (1). She externalizes this violence she has internalized by murdering her illegitimate child and living with the guilt: “A child fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles in the forest. . . . A sawmill was nearby. Its pyrami-

³The book is a mix of short stories, poems, and a dramatic piece, all written lyrically and hence the difficulty of genre classifications.

dal sawdust pile smouldered. It is a year before one completely burns" (4). "Becky" in another story is a white woman with two black sons. The violence here is that of sexual inhibition and miscegenation. She lives ostracized by both blacks and whites because of her sexual "sin," and her children leave her after they shoot two men. Before that, people do not know if she is still alive or dead and fear her boys, for "[t]hey'd beat and cut a man who meant nothing at all in mentioning that they lived along the road" (10). Violent oppression turned her sons against other blacks. One day the chimney falls and damages her home, and she dies buried under the bricks. She dies as a consequence of a refusal by both blacks and whites to acknowledge love across racial lines, thus making her a victim of social violence. The violence of her boys is that of social rejection, of being treated as social outcasts. "Carma" in a third story is a strong, sensual farming woman who is unfaithful to her husband while he is absent. He hears rumors about her infidelity, but she denies them. She fakes death once and this deception proves her infidelity with another man pretending to rescue her. Her husband turns violent: "His head went off. Slashed one of the men who'd helped, the man who'd stumbled over her. Now he's in the gang. Who was her husband" (20). Violence in this story is again that of sexual frustration and jealousy. "Fern" in a fourth story is made a prostitute in Georgia around men who do not understand her: "When she was young, a few men took her, but got no joy from it" (25). She gets tired of this as well and decides to become a virgin: "Something inside of her got tired of them, I guess, for I am certain that for the life of her she could not tell why or how she began to turn them off" (25). Men violate her sexually and emotionally, and she rebels. The daughter of a black mother and a Jewish father, Fern is an illegitimate offspring of sexual violation in a sense, that of miscegenation. She is part of a history of interracial and interethnic violence. So far, violence in *Cane* seems to be part of Toomer's

scheme of documenting black life in the rural South with no clear polemical thrusts.

Unlike the vignettes and short poems that comprise most of the work, the culmination of the first part of *Cane* is a fully-developed prose story with interracial love and violence as its theme. “Blood-Burning Moon” is the only story with direct interracial confrontation. Louisa works for white folks, and the younger son of her employers, Bob Stone, loves her. Tom Burwell, significantly called Big Boy, is black, strong, and earthy, a manly man working in the fields, and he also loves Louisa. Louisa loves both men. Sexual jealousy and violent racial oppression make Tom knock another black man to the ground for gossiping about Louisa and Bob Stone and laughing at Tom for claiming she is his: “Tom strode over to him. Yanked him up and knocked him to the ground. Several of Manning’s friends got up to fight for him. Tom whipped out a long knife and would have cut them to shreds if they hadn’t ducked into the woods” (55). Tom, wanting her as his future wife, promises Louisa he will cut Bob “jes like I cut a nigger” if he finds out the gossip about her and Bob is true (57). Bob wants to possess her as a sexual object. Bob passes the house where his “mistress” lives takes her: “Direct, honest, bold. None of this sneaking that he had to go through now” (59). From a once-prominent white Southern family, Bob knows whites and his family would be repulsed his affair with a black woman, and he also feels shame when he hears that “his girl” is also seeing a “nigger.” Racism/white supremacy and sexual jealousy are thus instigators of violence, for Bob does not see in Tom a worthy rival. Violence is also stirred here by cosmic, irrational forces, however, symbolized by the blood-burning moon of the title, which makes it a fatalistic, inescapable outcome of interracial mixing and confrontations. Violence becomes an existential condition beyond the control of both races. In this sense, irrational violence is generalized as an existential manifestation of a world without rules. Violence

is unpredictable/contingent yet a foregone conclusion of racial intermingling.

After overhearing men talking about Louisa and Tom Burwell, Bob's anger possesses him, placing him under the spell of drives he does not control: "Sizzling heat welled up within him. His feet felt as if they rested on red-hot coals. They stung him to quick movement" (62). Propelled by a blind sexual drive, Bob "plunged furiously down" the path to the factory town to look for Louisa at their meeting place, cutting his face and lips on cane leaves, foreshadowing the imminent violence: "He tasted blood. Not his own blood; Tom Burwell's blood" (62). His "blind rushing" (62-63) is unstoppable, for he is heading for an inevitable clash and a cruel fate. Sexual/biological drives in a hostile environment prepare us for a life-and-death struggle. Finding Louisa in Tom's arms, "Bob lunged at him. Tom side-stepped, caught him by the shoulder, and flung him to the ground. Straddled him" (63). While Tom "hammers" him with staggering blows, Bob pulls out a knife, but it is Tom who slashes Bob's throat. The following description of the ensuing violence is short and not shockingly gruesome: Bob "had a sweetish sick feeling. Blood began to flow. Then he felt a sharp twist of pain. He let his knife drop" (64). Blacks who had seen the fight then "slunk into their homes" and blew out their candles. After hearing Bob accuse Tom of the violence, white men from the town are moved by racial hatred and rush "like ants upon a forage" to take up the lynching tools: "Shotguns, revolvers, rope, kerosene, torches" (65). They move to the old factory, and the drama of unavoidable violence unfolds: "Tom knew that they were coming. He couldn't move" (65). The townsmen are dehumanized in their rage and multitude: "They poured down on him. They swarmed" (65). Tom, however, gains in manhood and beauty, becoming a Christ figure in the ordeal to come: "Tom [was] bound to the stake. His breast was bare. Nails scratches let little lines of blood trickle down and mat into the hair. His face, his eyes were set and stony" (66). One man suggests more than

one death: “Burn him over [the well], and when the woodwork caved in, his body would drop to the bottom. Two deaths for a goddam nigger” (66). But wood and stakes are ready in the old factory, for it obviously witnessed many lynchings before, and the white men pour kerosene and fling torches into the pile. Violence continues to be covert and lyrically cursory at the critical moment: “The mob yelled. The mob was silent. Now Tom could be seen within the flames” (66). And finally: “Tom’s eyes popped. His head settled downward. The mob yelled” (67). We then hear the lyrical refrain of this tragic dramatization of violence, which aestheticizes gruesome violence into a ritualistic song: “Red nigger moon. Sinner! / Blood-burning moon. Sinner! / Come out that fact’ry door” (67).

Before we consider what Toomer accomplishes through the depiction of violence in the stories of *Cane* in general and in “Blood-Burning Moon” in particular, we should briefly consider the whole scheme of the book, for violence in *Cane* is seen against interracial/intraracial victims as well as nature and animals. Violence is depicted in the book in different racial, sexual, and emotional manifestations. In turning to the last part of the book, we find a dramatic piece where violence is omnipresent yet indirect. “Kabnis” comes to teach in the South, “where they burn and hang men” (164), and he becomes restless and an insomniac. When a chicken bothers him with its cackling at night, he “whirls the chicken by its neck, and throws the head away. . . . He wipes the blood from his hands onto the coarse scant grass” (160-61). In addition, member of the black community intensify Kabnis’s anxieties about his new life in the land of his roots. For example, one man, Layman, increases Kabnis’s paranoia by telling him stories about southern violence: “Seen um shoot an cut a man t pieces who had died th night befo. Yassur. An they didnt stop when they found out he was dead—jes went on ahackin at him anyway” (173). Because it is contextualized as a story within a story, such violence against an anonymous victim is not rendered directly for us; even Kabnis experiences

the horror indirectly. The point is probably to scare Kabnis or just to warn him about southern life. The violence of racism, slavery, and lynching is in the atmosphere, in the past. It can be smelled everywhere, for the wind sings to Kabnis of lynched black children; he hears sounds and voices of men coming to lynch him and ghosts dragging trees: “A scraping sound, like a piece of wood dragging over the ground, is coming near” (164). He looks under his bed and sees a robe. He believes he feels ghosts around him: “There must be many dead things moving in silence. They come here to touch me. I swear I feel their fingers” (164-65). In addition to other stories about lynching and killing, Layman tells Kabnis that whites “had jes knocked two others like you kill a cow—brained um with an ax . . .” (174). He also relates how Mame Lamkins was killed “in th street, an some white man seein th risin in her stomach as she lay there soppo in her blood like any cow, took an ripped her belly open, an th kid fell out. It was living; but a nigger baby aint supposed t live. So, he jabbed his knife in it an stuck it t a tree” (178-79). All she did was she try to hide her husband when they wanted him. Fearful, Kabnis stumbles on a rope while walking home and thinks the mob is after him (181). The excessive violence and graphic realism in the stories Kabnis hears carry more than a protest agenda. It is a substance for storytelling by men who tease Kabnis and exploit his fears. The tellers are comfortable telling Kabnis these stories because they are used to such horror and tell it unflinchingly. If there is a hint here, it might be that violence in *Cane* is less propagandistic and more imaginative, although both ends do not have to exclude each other.

The violence depicted in *Cane* shows the beauty and pain of the southern rural life more than it promotes a reformist message. Jerry Bryant argues that Toomer’s aim is “to capture a disappearing world” (133), i.e. the beauty of the pastoral South despite its painful legacy. Toomer, Bryant argues, “was less dedicated to arousing his readers to political action to abolish the practice than to selecting the most aesthetically functional way

of depicting it” (142). Bryant calls those who write portraits of violence, like Toomer, “aesthetes” and those who write polemical novels “moralists” (150). Barbara Foley argues for something similar: “If the text acknowledges the harshness of racism and poverty, it subordinates social protest to lyricism, the representation of the here and now to the search for prophetic truths beyond the limits of history” (181). She argues that “Toomer was also a symbolist and myth-maker” (194). So, he was aware of racial oppression and yet wrote about it imaginatively, indirectly, generally, and lyrically. Alain Solard sees in the violence in *Cane* something else, however, and maybe the opposite: “the sound of protest is distinct in this text. Racism is not underrated here. The racial conflict is shown to be a drama of the South, and rather than subdued, it is magnified to mythical dimensions” (561). Overall, and insofar as this violence is universalized as a human experience, it loses its militant racial nature and becomes a celebration of black life in all its aspects and the manhood of the black man. Aesthetic and propagandistic violence do not have to exclude each other within a single work, although they can exist in degrees. As shown, violence in *Cane* touches interracial and intraracial targets and even animals and nature. It is a generalized lived condition and often an outcome of human relations. Hence, it loses its interracial nature and thus much of its protest import. The book’s experimental nature and the diversity of the violence depicted mitigate but do not nullify the protest/propaganda dimensions. Moreover, the aesthetic depiction of violence in *Cane* can testify to Toomer’s ultimate awareness of the essential nature of literature as literature rather than a political treatise, i.e. as aesthetic art that can carry political messages.

Waldo Frank’s *Holiday* (1923) is thematically similar to the stories in *Cane*, especially “Blood-Burning Moon.” *Holiday* is a novel that was promoted alongside Harlem Renaissance novels. Frank, a white writer, uses his experience of the South as a travel companion for Toomer in 1922 to write a modernist, lyrical ac-

count of a southern lynching in a single day in Nazareth. Like *Cane*, *Holiday* shows the interplay between propaganda and aesthetics and the dominance of one over the other. A very hot day makes a white landowner, Virginia Hade, and a young black overseer, John Cloud, give the black fruit pickers a holiday. Meanwhile, a revival tent is set up in the town, and people are overcome by religious passion. While swimming, Virginia meets John and desires him, but he rejects for fear of the consequences. Feeling offended and wanting him to be punished, Virginia cuts herself. The sexual and religious fervor prepare us for the violent end, and the similarities to “Blood-Burning Moon” are several. Virginia’s brother and father think John raped her, and men march to his place led by her brother Bob.⁴ John’s crying mother and his black lover, Mary, implore him to run, but he knows, as did Tom, that it is no use. As in “Blood-Burning Moon,” the pain to come for John is mixed with the beauty of his naked, well-built black body as he stands among his lynchers “taller and calm like stone” (223). They rope him in the public square, and he stands, like Tom, brave and calm beneath a tree: “The men work fast. Day glooms. Day dies. The Square sinks into a well of night. A rope whips taut. A body dangles in air. A body dangles in flame” (232). The religious orgy that ends with John’s lynching makes the town beneath him peer “with grimed eyes through the murk of its spent lust” (233). The town “soothed by the silence, sleeps in her bed” (233). Sexual frustration, as in Tom’s case, is the instigator of violence here, and sexual symbolism is fit for such a message. The detached, indirect, hurried, and curt description of lynching, like the one used to describe Tom’s lynching, has an aesthetic function. A white writer describes lynching poetically/

⁴The tripartite nexus of violence in “Blood-Burning Moon” involving the white Bob Stone, the black Tom Burwell, and the black Louisa is also found here but with some changes: the white brother of Virginia named Bob, the black John Cloud, and the white Virginia. In both cases, violence basically concerns white men and black men and is triggered by sexual bigotry. It is a white woman who instigates violence in *Holiday*, however, while it is a black woman in “Blood-Burning Moon.”

lyrically to depict a part of the reality of southern life rather than to evoke pathos. Again, the poetic sensibility communicated in his language makes Frank, like Toomer, a man aware of the essential aestheticization of violence once portrayed in literature. Toomer and Frank use racial polemics in carefully constructed, self-conscious genres as material for art.

THEMATICS AND TRAJECTORIES OF INTERRACIAL VIOLENCE:
PROTEST VIOLENCE/OVERT PROPAGANDA

Unlike *Cane* or *Holiday*, Walter White's *The Fire in the Flint* (1924) has a strong protest message and acts as direct propaganda for an anti-lynching campaign. It sheds light on the political, sexual, and economic dimensions of racial violence, and lynching in particular. White, who worked for the NAACP during the writing and publication of the novel, was white in color yet of African-American heritage, and his appearance helped him in passing as white and in investigating lynching. In *The Fire in the Flint*, Kenneth Harper gradually comes to an awareness of his racial identity and develops a militant racial consciousness. After studying and bravely serving his country in the war, the northern-trained black physician is a talented tenth who returns to his native town in Georgia and is eventually lynched. He returns to practice medicine, unaware of the difficulty of keeping oneself away from racial confrontations and racism. His faith in humanism, middle-class values, and reason is put to the test as he experiences racism first-hand. The brutal lynching he is subjected to is ironically contrasted with his saving the life of a white girl after his own brother is lynched for defending the family honor when their sister is raped. While Kenneth dies wronged for a suspected affair with a white woman, a strong and common justification for many actual lynchings, a quotation from a newspaper report ironically misidentifies him as a criminal whose brother was insane. The novel then attempts to romanticize race relations or describe them in aesthetic terms

in the South early in the 20th century and after the Great War. It points out the dangers of life in the South due to racism and shows how these dangers can touch anyone regardless of accomplishment or status. Hence, the novel's presentation of a middle-class family whose members are educated and financially secure is also part of the propaganda machine. We have to realize, however, that the radical orientation of the novel, its overt propaganda, is still part of a cultural campaign conducted via literature.

Kenneth's life is inevitably brought to a tragic end, for there is no escape from southern violence. His profession calls him to treat a white girl at night when her father is by chance away from home and her mother is alone with her, which makes the racist whites suspect him of rape; further, he has fallen in love with a black activist calling for civil rights and thus cannot remain silent about injustice. Even he is more qualified than other physicians, Kenneth starts to suffer professionally from prejudice in Central City simply because he is an inferior "Nigger" (15). Kenneth's father was left alone because he maintained a non-confrontational stance with whites (17), and he taught his children that only bad blacks get lynched. But his sons cannot be "good Negroes" by white standards. Bob Harper, Kenneth's brother, feels the economic exploitation and lies of white merchants claiming that his father owed them money, but he cannot pursue legal action because of prejudice: "a verdict against the Negro was sure even before the case was opened" (23). Black farmers and share-croppers who do not get their dues from their landlords also cannot find legal representation (29). In addition to the negative emotional impact of exploitation and internalized racism, this economic dimension increases the potential violence. It also highlights the need for political organization among blacks within the propagandistic framework of the novel. The innocent, optimistic Kenneth tells his mother when he is still new in the South, "I'm going to solve my own problems, do as much good as I can, make as much money as I can! If every

Negro in America did the same thing, there wouldn't be any 'race problem'" (28). His romanticization of the race problem is similar to the optimism of black intellectuals thinking that a cultural renaissance and an improved image of the race can solve it. Though Kenneth tries to avoid racism, it finds him. He finds it difficult to prove himself as a talented physician for blacks because of what he takes to be "slave mentality" (48), and white patients, especially women, find it taboo to have a black doctor touch them. Unlike the detached attitude of his inexperienced brother, Bob has a confrontational, non-conformist mindset. Bob is unhappy with white boys harassing black women in the streets and in front of local stores (66-67). It is part of the internalization of racism and inferiority—i.e. the emotional violence blacks had to endure—to see such things and not to be able to do anything about them. Bob stands for the militant New Negro type seeking a change in the status quo.

Kenneth's disillusionment with the racial situation in the South is augmented when Roy Ewing, a tolerant white, tells him the story of a black man who worked for him and who was lynched because he was wrongly assumed to have scared a white girl (69). Kenneth begins to develop a militant attitude. After a conversation about race relations in Central City when Roy tells him not to protest, Kenneth thinks to himself, "Even a rat will fight when he's cornered, and these coloured people aren't going to stand for these things all the time" (72). He begins to view things in naturalistic terms, to see things objectively in their ugliness. Violence is seen as something necessary for bare biological survival. The idealism of the race leaders about cultural contributions and success becomes questionable: "Already he found one of his pet ideas to be of doubtful value—the theory he had had that success would give a Negro immunity from persecution" (74). After Bud Ware is shot by George Parker, a white man who visits Bud's wife while Bud is away working, Kenneth begins to understand racism. These black men he knows are exploited as workers, their women are raped, and they are

not supposed to do anything about it. Kenneth gets entangled in this race problem involuntarily: “He had determined to stay out of the reach of the long arms of the octopus they called the race problem—but he felt himself slowly being drawn into its insidious embrace” (98). His attempt to file a death report for Bud Ware leads Kenneth to County Commissioner of Health Lane, supposedly a member of the KKK, who immediately reports Kenneth’s actions to the Sherriff Robert Parker, George’s brother. Kenneth also adopts the cause of exploited black farmers through the legal organization of co-operative societies, which irritates the racist Kluxers even more. One night Kenneth finds Nancy Ware, Bud’s wife, tortured, whipped, and covered with tar, a bloody mess thrown in a street by the KKK: “From the mouth and nose there ran a stream of blood which already was forming a little pool beneath her face that became bloody mud as it mixed with the dust in the road” (185). Upon seeing this, Kenneth is emotionally outraged and experiences “a feeling of nausea at the revolting sight” (184). Violence touches him emotionally, and he is “shaken by the fury of his anger, more devastating because he knew that he could do nothing but hurl silent imprecations on the heads of those who had done this deed—impotent because his skin was black and he lived in the South . . .” (188). He awakens to the realization of the inevitability of death, of violence as a raw fact and an ugly reality in the South fostered by the mere existence of two races next to each other, and of the absence of a divine order preventing injustice. Violence begets violence and becomes a means of instinctive survival against great odds: after what happened to Nancy and after receiving threatening messages, the “New Negroes” “who had been happy-go-lucky, care-free, and kindly in manner began to talk among themselves of ‘dying fighting’ if forced to the limit” (195), an echo of McKay’s protest message.

Despite his bitter disillusionment, Kenneth is still dedicated to professional and personal success and reluctantly goes when called to treat Mary Ewing, Roy’s daughter. His marriage prepa-

rations are underway, and Bob is getting ready to study law at a prestigious college to become a lawyer and help his people. These innocent dreams are halted, however. Their sister, Mamie, is gang-raped by white boys and returns home ravished, bloody, and bruised. Assets like education and success are meaningless now when mere existence in peace is not allowed. Racial tension steadily mounts, and irrational violence is set loose. Bob is filled with “a blind, unreasoning fury” (230), and his vengeance on the perpetrators begins immediately and instinctively:

Without saying a word, his eyes burning with a deadly hatred, Bob raised the revolver he had in his hand and fired once—twice—into Archer’s breast. Charley Allen rushed upon Bob to overpower him. He met head-on the two bullets that came to meet him, and fell gasping and coughing on the ground at Bob’s feet. (231-32)

Bob flees, reflecting ironically and bitterly on the sudden, contingent change of fortunes: “Twelve hours before, he had been eagerly planning to leave for school. Now, his sister ruined, he a murderer twice over—fleeing for his life!” (232). Once he has experienced violence even indirectly, however, he wants to fight and kill. He wants to show those following him what McKay called for in “If We Must Die,” that “a ‘damned nigger’ knew how to die! Like a man!” (234). His lynchers burn the barn where he hides, and he tries to kill as many of them as possible before he kills himself with his last bullet, therefore denying the lynchers the chance to do so. They still brutally drag his body out, shoot it, tie it to a Ford, and take a “dead body, riddled and torn, bumping grotesquely over the holes in the road” back to town (236). His body is burned and staked by the exultant mob according to the ritual of lynching: “Women, tiny boys and girls, old men and young stood by, a strange light on their faces. They sniffed eagerly the odour of burning human flesh which was becoming more and more faint” (236-37). They take his body parts for souvenirs; a boy takes his skull for a mantelpiece display (237). This harsh, unflinching realism in the depiction of violence adds

to the protest message and gives the novel another naturalistic dimension.

Kenneth, upon returning from Atlanta and hearing about his sister's rape and his brother's lynching, realizes the inevitability of interracial violence. We as readers also come to realize that this violence is determined and caused by environmental factors beyond the characters' control. He is repelled by the sordidness and depravity of this violence. Evoking Fanon's assertions, thoughts about the "inevitable clash that continued oppression would cause" haunt him: "A Negro never gets away from it" (264). In existential terms, there is no way out of this predicament of unexplainable violence; the way out of it is always a way in. Realizing that his non-confrontational stance did not work, he feels the need for a militant one: "

Hadn't he given up everything that might antagonize the whites? Hadn't he tried in every way he could to secure and retain their friendship? By God, he'd show them now! The white-livered curs! He'd fight them to the death! He'd pay them back in kind for what they had brought on him and his! (268)

His attempts at conciliation were meaningless, and he is not living within a protected, grand scheme. He weighs his options now. He stands as a man similar to the one McKay depicts: "cornered, wounded, determined to fight—fight—fight! . . . He would demand and take the last ounce of flesh—he would exact the last drop from his enemies with all the cruelty he could invent!" (269). Mrs. Ewing calls to tell him about a relapse in her daughter's health, however. He vents his anger on her yet reluctantly agrees to attend to her daughter. He saves Mary's life, although he first contemplates revenge on her since her parents did not listen to his words about her diet, presumably because they did not trust a black doctor. Thinking he is having an affair with Mrs. Ewing while Roy is away, the Kluxers get ready to lynch him. He gets out of the house, courageously fights the men waiting for him, and proves himself an equal, again calling to mind McKay's "If We Must Die": he fights "[m]adly, desperately, gloriously" (297). He tries to get to his car but is shot in the leg. While Kenneth

is glorified as a man, the Kluxers are dehumanized in their rage: “On they came, howling, gloating fiendishly—their rage increased by the mess they’d made of what was intended should be an easy job!” (299). They capture him, and he is lynched by burning at the stake. The newspaper’s account ironically says his lynching was due to “attempted criminal assault on a white woman” (300). Bob, according to the same account, is thought to have been lynched after he became “temporarily insane” and killed two white young men of “excellent reputations” (300).

The moralistic, melodramatic tone of *White* is clear right to the end. Although the rate of lynching was decreasing during the third decade of the 20th century, White was still indignant at the practice and other injustices. He often seems sentimental and pathetic to show blacks as (manly) victims. White uses middle-class male protagonists as representative of the New Negro. They are educated, professionally successful, and refined, men after Du Bois’s own heart. We have no prostitutes, cabarets, or vulgar talk/dialect to appeal to stereotypes about blacks. The plot itself is straightforward, essayistic, and easy to follow. The goal seems to be reaching white audiences, making them agree with the novel’s message, and evoking sympathy for the race. Thus, the novel, as Du Bois hoped, uses violence for explicit propaganda purposes. However, the novel’s employment of violence is rooted in a cultural endeavor to change the conception and image of the black man.

Du Bois’s *Dark Princess: A Romance* (1928) is another contribution to political activism and propagandistic themes as well as a protest against racial injustice in global terms. It is a polemical novel about radical politics and a meditation on the use and efficacy of violence against racism. The focus of the novel is the black middle-class and the working class to some extent. Because racism prohibits black physicians from seeing or touching a white woman during childbirth, Matthew Towns is unable to enroll in a required obstetrics class at a white hospital and is therefore forced to leave medical school. He exiles himself in Europe,

Germany, and his prior political idealism is shattered. In Berlin, he meets the Indian Princess Kautilya of Bwodpur, the daughter of a maharajah in British India, who is a leader of a Pan-Asian movement. The movement has a revolutionary potential and tries to join forces with the Pan-African movement to effect the emancipation of the colonized and exploited darker peoples of the world. The goal is to unite Arabs, Japanese, Chinese, Indians, Africans, and African Americans against imperialism and racism. Matthew returns to America with a mission to report to the Princess on the potential of African Americans for revolt. Employed as a railway porter, Matthew meets Miguel Perigua, a man leading a radical organization. Enraged after one of his porter friends is suddenly lynched for an alleged assault on a white woman, Matthew tries unsuccessfully to lead a strike among porters. He then joins Perigua and plots to blow up a train carrying Klan members. Minutes before the plan is carried out, he discovers the Princess is on board. He stops the train and rescues her just before the explosion. Perigua dies in the explosion, and Matthew is sent to prison for ten years, and after he is released he marries the Princess and fathers her child, who is to become the messenger and "Messiah to all the Darker Worlds!" (311). The didactic message of a Pan-African/Pan-Asian alliance makes Du Bois a propagandist in his depiction of the initial violence of racism and imperialism and the potential retaliatory violence of the oppressed masses. Du Bois is pleading a case against global oppression and injustice.

Racism and violence beget retaliatory violence and revolution. Perigua believes in violence and fighting to stop lynching and racial injustice: "Dynamite. Dynamite for every lynching mob," he tells Matthew (46). When the black co-worker is lynched and the attempted retaliatory strike fails, Perigua wants to blow up the train on which the victim was working and dies in the process (82). Matthew similarly decides to join and offer his life so that other blacks can live freely and with dignity. His thoughts evoke Fanon's terms as he contemplates the violent act: "All

the enslaved, all the raped, all the lynched, all the ‘jim-crowed’ marched in ranks behind him, bloody with rope and club and iron, crimson with stars and nights. He was going to fight and die for vengeance and freedom” (87-88). His initial dream of “world alliance” (87) against oppression is shattered now after he witnesses the unjust lynching of his friend, and “he was ready to die. This was all he could do for the cause” (87). Matthew and Perigua find dying for a cause affords life for themselves and other oppressed blacks. Matthew concludes, in Fanonian fashion, that violence should meet violence: “Except by the shedding of blood there was no remission of sin. . . . They must fight or die. There was no use in talk or argument” (87). For a while, Matthew is bent on violent revenge: “Vengeance was his. With one great blow he was striking at the Heart of Hell. . . . On, on, up and on! To kill and maim and hate! To throw his life against the smug liars and lepers, hypocrites and thieves, who leered at him and mocked him!” (88). Hatred fills him and neutralizes his reasoning. Violence is his existential justification for an authentic life, his commitment, and his means of action.

Kautilya is less militant than Matthew and seems to believe in organization, planning, “democracy as a method of discovering real aristocracy” (225). She is the counterpart of Perigua. Matthew’s stance changes when he is reunited with the Princess, and irrational rage and violence give way to rationalism and propaganda:

The mission of the darker peoples, my Kautilya, of black and brown and yellow, is to raise out of their pain, slavery, and humiliation, a beacon to guide manhood to health and happiness and life and away from the morass of hate, poverty, crime, sickness, monopoly, and the mass-murder called war. (257)

However, violence is still an option if it is the only possibility for achieving emancipation from oppression. Matthew in a letter to the Princess claims that “with fire and sword, blood and whips, we must fight this thing out physically and literally beat the world into submission and a real civilization” (285). Even the Princess believes in the ultimate emancipation of the darker

peoples regardless of the means and that “whether in Peace and fostering Friendship with all men, or in Blood and Storm—it is for Them—the Pale Masters of today—to say” (297). She explains that there are many factions within this global liberation movement and that some, including herself, primarily believe “in the path of Peace and Reason, of cooperation among the best and poorest, of gradual emancipation, self-rule, and world-wide abolition of the color line, and poverty and war” (297). She adds that others among her group believe only in violence:

Nothing but bloody defeat in a world-wide war of dark against white will, in their opinion, ever beat sense and decency into Europe and American and Australia. They have no faith in mere reason, in alliance with oppressed labor, white and colored; in liberal thought, religion, nothing! Pound their arrogance into submission, they cry; kill them; conquer them; humiliate them. (297)

She then asserts that “They may be right—that’s the horror, the nightmare of it: they may be right. But surely, surely we may seek other and less costly ways. Force is not the first word. It is the last—perhaps not even that” (297). Du Bois, hence, contemplates the efficacy of racial propaganda through cultural and political performance/representation versus direct violence. For him, the New Negro returned from fighting in the Great War to continue fighting for civil rights politically and culturally, first, and physically if necessary. The value of violence in *Dark Princess* sheds a propagandistic light on the problem Du Bois wanted us to consider in *The Souls of Black Folk*, where he asserts that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (v). The novel, a work of cultural propaganda in global terms, does not exclude retaliatory or revolutionary violence, although it is subordinate to political action. The novel distances and complicates the representation of violence by self-consciously making it a discourse the characters negotiate. The explicit propaganda message of the novel renders it plainly moralistic.

In “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937), Richard Wright attacks those petty uplift propagandists pleading for social justice and the humanity of Negroes and calls them “prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America” (194). For Wright, the humanity of blacks was already established and another kind of literature was required, not one showing respectable well-to-do blacks but a naturalistic Marxist one that does not shy away from the seamy aspects of black life or working-class people: “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?” (197). He urges writers to focus on “the harsh lot of their race” through “a Marxist conception of reality” (200). Violence acquires a new function in Wright’s writings. It no longer shows blacks as pathetic or militant victims of interracial clashes. While Wright was writing well after the Harlem Renaissance, he internalize its major tenets and was writing within its militant spirit; the essence of his problematic assertions was already captured by writers like Du Bois, White, and even Toomer. Such writers expressed interracial violence in terms of socio-economic and cosmic forces. While Du Bois and White often pleaded the case of educated middle-class protagonists and were often attacked as overt propagandists, the militant content of their writings was Marxist in orientation. Propaganda messages may have been effected at the expense of the artistic merit of literary works, but such works were ultimately cultural products operating at the level of textual politics.

The treatment of violence in Harlem Renaissance novels is rooted in the major cultural debates by the proponents of the movement on the value and function of art in general and literature in particular. Therefore, such treatment hovers between overt and covert propaganda ends and captures the nuanced conception of the New Negro that entails radical militancy and cultural campaigning. The general points that emerge from this

discussion include the following: the depiction of interracial violence in Harlem Renaissance novels is a means of cultural protest, not shying away from a harsh reality; the collective history of oppression was part of a communal memory not to be easily forgotten, and hence it was continually revisited in fiction to testify to historical injustices; violence can be propelled by the socioeconomic ideologies of racism, enforced poverty, and oppression—and thus it is existential and even Marxist in nature; finally, the Harlem Renaissance writers, black or white but with some black blood/sympathies, wanted to bring interracial violence into the public view as part of the radical orientation of the movement and a rich literary theme. While this literature does not necessarily call for countering violence with violence, it is still a form of cultural resistance, and it calls for a reconsideration of racial power relations. The depiction of violence in most Harlem Renaissance novels often hovers between protest propaganda and aesthetics. Although violence decreased in the 1920s and 1930s, blacks wanted and campaigned for full legal equality. Critics like Du Bois and White found in the depiction of blacks as violent men or as criminals a perpetuation of the stereotypes they fought against. Hence, they were careful to represent blacks more as victims of injustice than offenders or initiators of violence, or simply as a man weighing the options of violence or non-violence. Younger and more radical black writers sought artistic freedom, including the freedom to depict revolutionary violence and harsh aspects about black life or to frame interracial violence within aesthetic/artistic depictions of black life and interracial relations. These two ends do not exclude each other, however. Insofar as violence is aesthetically treated as part of the collective human experience, it is indicative of the success of the Harlem Renaissance in escaping the provincialism and narrowness of moralistic propaganda. The Harlem Renaissance began with an assertion of violence, and it also ended with one during the depression and renewed race riots in 1930s. As such, racial uplift propaganda was not

adequate, and the cultural front did not exactly “succeed” at that time. It is a sign of success, though, that we current readers find the cultural productions of the Harlem Renaissance still relevant. Suffice it to say that violence as a cultural phenomenon is prevalent nowadays in the media and in literatures originating in politically hot zones.

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