The Color of Blood: John Brown, Jean Toomer, and the New Negro Movement

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African American Review, Volume 46, Numbers 2-3, Summer/Fall 2013, pp. 237-253 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/afa.2013.0071

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The dictum that one person’s freedom fighter is another person’s terrorist probably applies better to John Brown than to any other figure in U. S. history. Over the past 150 years, any given writer’s depiction of Brown has functioned as a kind of Rorschach test indicating both the terms of debate current in her/his historical moment as well as where the writer stands in relation to the larger issues embedded in Brown’s life and death: the role of whites in black liberation; the function of violence in social change; the nature and meaning of civil war. Most of the scholarship treating shifting representations of Brown has stressed the dramatic range of attitudes, from hostile to ambivalent to celebratory, displayed by white writers. African American treatments of Brown—from W. E. B. Du Bois’s view that Brown’s last written words “did more to shake the foundations of slavery than any single thing that ever happened in America” (John Brown 274) to Lerone Bennett’s conclusion that Brown “was of no color . . . of no race or age [but] pure passion, pure transcendence” (Quarles 139)—have prompted relatively little comparative analysis, largely because blacks have historically displayed far less skepticism toward the protagonist of Pottawatomie Creek and Harpers Ferry. But a consequence of the homogenization of the African American response to Brown has been to obscure its historically specific inflections. My goal here is to examine the discourse surrounding Brown, Harpers Ferry, and the U. S. Civil War that circulated during the upsurge of World War I-era antiracist radicalism that is usually dubbed the New Negro Movement. By featuring the centrality of the figure of Brown in an early text by Jean Toomer—a writer ordinarily viewed as an apolitical experimental modernist—I hope to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the notion among even the movement’s more marginall participants that a new civil war, one directed against capitalism, might be needed to resolve the racial and class contradictions besetting U. S. society.¹

Four features of this historical conjuncture supply the background to my query. First, militant resistance to white racism: although the so-called “red summer” of 1919 witnessed an unprecedented wave of violence directed against both political radicals and African Americans, the black response manifested a new willingness to use force in self-defense. Claude McKay’s widely republished sonnet, “If We Must Die,” captured the fighting spirit of those confronting the “common foe” (Complete 177) on Washington’s Seventh Street, dubbed the “bloodfield” of the first urban confrontation in which blacks responded in kind to racist violence. Second, emerging hopes for class-conscious multiracial unity: although black workers were confronted with segregation in federal offices during the Wilson presidency and encountered intensely racialized postwar competition over housing and jobs, the year 1919 also witnessed key instances of black-white labor solidarity. When three white lumber
workers lost their lives defending a black union organizer from company thugs in Bogalusa, Louisiana, “Bogalusa” emerged as a possible metonymy for the labor movement of the future. Third, the linking of “social equality” with social revolution: the New Negroes’ resistance to eugenicist pseudoscience and white supremacist notions of “100% Americanism” was inseparable from their vision of a humanity rendered universal through the abolition of the wage relation. Where anticommunist racists like Lothrop Stoddard and Thomas Dixon equated Bolshevism with racial degeneracy, the radicals editing the Messenger and the Crusader rejected racial hierarchy, linking it to the imperatives of class rule. Fourth and finally, the internationalist inspiration of the Bolshevik Revolution, which not only had demonstrated that peasants and workers in the Russian empire could throw off the yoke of elitist class rule but also—with the formation of the Third International—had called upon the laboring masses throughout the brown, black, and yellow worlds to claim for themselves the right to self-determination celebrated at Versailles. Racially coded class oppression was viewed by the New Negroes as both a domestic and an international phenomenon. Its antidote entailed conjoining the cause of the proletariat in industrialized nations with the revolt of the submerged masses in colonized and preindustrial parts of the world. The impending civil war would not only complete the aborted tasks of Reconstruction but also bring into being a global classless society. The raiders on Harpers Ferry were early harbingers of world revolution. 2

While I shall allude to the prominent journalistic advocates of both racist antiradicalism and radical antiracism, my principal focus here will be on works of literature featuring the figure of John Brown: Thomas Dixon’s novel The Man in Gray (1921), which demonizes the protagonist of Kansas and Harpers Ferry as an atavistic “red menace,” and Jean Toomer’s 1922 short story, “Withered Skin of Berries,” which treats Brown as both conscience and inspiration, “rumbling down the falls” of history. The trope of blood, we shall see, figures centrally in the discourses of conservatives and radicals alike. It signifies violence: the violence of exploitation and repression, the violence of forcible resistance—the meaning carried in Brown’s last written words. Blood also signifies human oneness, its redness trumping the racist claim that there are separate “white” and “black” (or “brown,” “red,” and “yellow”) bloods—the meaning carried in Brown’s declaration at his trial that it had been necessary to “mingle my blood . . . with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments” (qtd. in Du Bois, John Brown 271). Distinctive to the postwar moment was the additional association of blood with both resistance and radicalism during the “red summer” of 1919, when Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer bemoaned the fact that so many African Americans were “seeing red” (Kornweibel 91). It was the color of blood, and not just its free flow, that inflected its meaning for the New Negro Movement’s horrified observers and committed participants alike. 3

From “Black Legions” to “Red Menace”: Racist Antiradicalism in 1919

The eugenicist discourse that gained widespread currency in the United States in the early 1920s preserved various propositions from earlier white nationalist paradigms. In the crucible of 1919, however, “100% Americanism” was rearticulated in relation to “internationalism,” a term signifying both Bolshevism and the insurrection of the world’s nonwhite peoples. Lothrop Stoddard, the most prominent of the postwar racist ideologists, deplored the “Shibboleth of the melting-pot,” proclaiming that the absorption of would-be “new Americans” had resulted in painful “pangs of national indigestion” (Racial Realities 240). But he positioned himself as

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at once a racial nationalist and a racial internationalist. The recent war had been, he argued, a civil war within the white race—"a domestic struggle between close-knit blood-relatives" (New World 160)—rendered still more tragic now that the Western world was faced by the "simply incalculable . . . menace of Bolshevism" (Rising Tide 218). This "menace" was Asiatic in origin: "Lenine, surrounded by his Chinese executioners, sits behind the Kremlin walls, a modern Jenghiz Khan plotting the plunder of the world" (219).

In Stoddard's estimate, political and biological categories were inseparable. Constituting a "war of the hand against the brain" (Revolt 175), Bolshevism appealed primarily to inferior races. Those whites who had joined the communist cause were "renegade[s] . . . traitor[s] within the gates, who would betray the citadel, degrade the very fibre of our being, and ultimately hurl a rebarbarized, racially impoverished world into the most debased and hopeless of mongrelizations" (Rising Tide 221). The necessary response to a Red-led upsurge of the world's peoples of color thus had to be at once national—defense of the "inner dikes" constituted by the world's "white" nations—and international, a "pan-Nordic syndication of power" (200).

While eugenics supplied the long-term solution—guaranteeing that "clean, virile, genius-bearing blood" would "stream down the ages [and] . . . sweep us on to higher and nobler destinies"—in the short run it was necessary that "Bolshevism . . . the arch-enemy of civilization and the race . . . be crushed out with iron heels no matter what the cost." And while in his nightmare vision of the "rising tide of color" Stoddard envisioned the "pan-Islamic" world as the principal threat to white supremacy, fears of black rebellion were not far behind. The war, he lamented, had put guns into the hands of black troops in Europe, who "killed white men, raped white women, tasted white luxuries, learned white weaknesses—and went home to tell their people the whole story" (New World 129). The "red summer" of 1919 reignited the passions that had motivated Stoddard to write his dissertation on the Haitian Revolution, which he adjudged "the first real shock between the ideals of white supremacy and race-equality; a prologue to the mighty drama of our own day" (Rising Tide 227).

Widely disseminated in the U. S. mass media by such popularizers as Kenneth Roberts of the Saturday Review of Literature, the views of Stoddard, Madison Grant, and other advocates of racist pseudoscience at once fueled fears of Bolshevist-fostered black discontent and sought to confirm inherited stereotypes of black docility and fidelity. In the early 1920s the United Daughters of the Confederacy revived plans to erect a large memorial boulder at Harpers Ferry inscribed with a lengthy text attesting to the martyrdom of Heyward Shepherd—the black baggage-handler, presumably embodying loyalty to the South, who was the first person killed by the raiders in 1859. These efforts coincided with latter-day Confederate proposals to erect on the national mall a statue honoring the figure of the nurturing slave "mammy," to be called the "Mammy Monument." Even as the civil rights leader J. Max Barber was forming the John Brown Memorial Association in 1922, such attempts at monument-making aimed to reassure visitors to Harpers Ferry and the nation's capital that the rebels who had recently taken up arms in the streets of Washington and Chicago were anomalous: the Old Negro had not been superseded by the New.
I shall want you to help me hive them.” But Dixon’s Brown is a fanciful amalgam. With his “intense Puritan face” that shows “a soul at war with itself” (106), Brown is the “Witch Hunter” reborn, driven by the “imperious atavism” of his New England forebears (150, 157). Yet he is also anti-American, a traitor within the gates, a sworn enemy of the Constitution. Although the historical Brown was in fact quintessentially patriotic—arguing over the objections of many Canadian blacks at the 1858 Chatham Convention that the planned revolt should proceed under the aegis of the U. S. flag—Dixon’s Brown, with his proclivity for “direct action,” is a prototype of “the modern Social anarchist” (105).6

The genetic makeup of Dixon’s Brown, moreover, is retrograde: his half-closed, shifting eyes, “pinpoints of light” flashing “a signal from an unknown world” (97-98), recall Stoddard’s “Lenine.” Yet Brown also resembles inferior European sub-breeds: “His head was remarkable for its small size. The brain space was limited and the hair grew low on the forehead, as if a hark back to the primitive man out of which humanity grew. His chin protruded into an aggressive threat.” His nose, moreover is suspiciously “Roman” (105-06). However anachronistic, Brown’s audience at a Bowery antislavery rally largely consists of recent European immigrants, “the first wave of the flood of degradation of . . . the racial stock of John Adams and John Hancock” (110). In his insistence that enslaved Africans are “white men in black skin,” he is, finally, the quintessential race traitor, himself a black man in white skin. Finding models for rebellion among Jamaican maroons and Haitian revolutionaries, as well as the insurrectionary Nat Turner, Brown is a black Jacobin, intent upon releasing on the helpless South the “Black Legions” of chaos. That African American soldiers had killed whites during the recent world war, and that clashes between racists and black ex-soldiers had prompted several of the postwar race riots, update Dixon’s obsession with the figure of the black man in a blue uniform.7

In The Man in Gray, Dixon’s preoccupation with cross-class white unity displays not only nostalgia for the Lost Cause but also anxieties about the present. Functioning as the author’s mouthpiece, Lee argues that slavery will disappear of its own accord. The tragedy of the coming Civil War’s “Blood Feud” is that it will needlessly pit white against white. Nor can blame for the war be placed on Lincoln, who is applauded for realizing that “there is a physical difference between the white and black races which will forever forbid their living together on terms of political and social equality” (313) and only reluctantly takes up arms. Instead, responsibility for the carnage of the war is assigned to fanatic abolitionists, foremost among them Brown, who yearn to submerge the entire nation into a witch’s cauldron of violence and race admixture. That Southern whites—of all classes—are the tragic victims of this craze for “social equality” is demonstrated through the novel’s subplot involving the poor white James P. Doyle. One of the actual proslavery activists killed by Brown and his men in 1856 in Kansas, Doyle, in Dixon’s fiction, originally occupies a rundown shack near Lee’s plantation in Virginia. Driven to desperation and drink by unsuccessful competition with black labor, Doyle—whose blond hair and domed forehead affirm his genetic gifts—regains his dignity when his ruling-class neighbor finances his move to Kansas, where he sets up a prosperous farm. Although Doyle becomes the helpless prey of the witch-hunting Brown, he is avenged some nine years later when his son John Doyle, a Confederate soldier, rushes into battle when he sees the swarming Negro soldiers in blue. “It was the poor white man who got beyond control at the sight of these yelling black troops wearing the uniform of the Republic,” writes Dixon. “Had their souls leaped the years and seen in a vision dark-skinned hosts charging the ranks of white civilization in a battle for supremacy of the world?” (410). While the South may have lost the Civil War, Dixon implies, white supremacy has won the battle for the hearts and minds of the white working class. Lee’s closing words at Appomattox resonate into the world of Dixon’s readers: “Yesterday is dead. Tomorrow is ours” (425).8
Dixon’s invocation of the trope of blood conjoins the novel’s central themes. Brown’s conviction that “the negro is blood brother of the white man” results in a call for “bloodshed” that awakens the atavistic “blood lust” of the abolitionist-inspired mob (111). In the “Red Tide” of the Civil War, the mob, ruled by a “Red Thought,” regresses to its bestial origins (352). When the “Black Battalions” of freedmen and escaped slaves join the Union Army, the “Red Menace” is merged with the “Black Legion,” now “unhived” and uttering its “voodoo yell” (409). Red and black merge in a nightmare vision that conjoins the Civil War of the century before with dire predictions of revolt in the modern era of world war, anticolonial rebellion, and communist revolution. Lee’s proclamation that “Tomorrow is ours” articulates an undercurrent of anxiety.

From Harpers Ferry to Bogalusa: Antiracist Radicalism in 1919

While radicals of various stripes had held up Brown as a model of revolutionary militancy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the figure of Brown took on appeal for a broader spectrum of writers in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. The Washington poet Georgia Douglas Johnson hailed “the seed [Brown] spread / In terror’s morning, flung with fingers red / In blood of tyrants” and declared his continuing inspiration: “And time still burgeoneth the fertile seed” (165). John Dos Passos concluded his 1921 novel Three Soldiers with its antiracist composer-hero, John Andrews, titling his orchestral work-in-progress “The Soul and Body of John Brown.” Edwin Arlington Robinson composed a dramatic monologue where the “old man” forecasts that slavery will be “swept / And washed out of the world with fire and blood” to prepare for “the harvest that is to come” (142-44). In 1919 the Canadian journalist Fred Landon proudly reflected that Ontario had hosted the Chatham Convention and noted that Brown and his raiders had their descendants in the I.W.W. (Landon). The British journalist Stephen Graham, recording his 1919 travels through the U. S. South in The Soul of John Brown, observed that “Russian serfs and military slaves and wage slaves and Negroes are finding an accord,” constituting “the foundation for a grand proletarian revolutionary movement throughout the world. . . . Spartacus lives” (265-66).

Radical abolitionism supplied a ready analogue for workers’ revolution in the press organs of the left. The Socialist New York Call reminded its readers of the currently imprisoned Eugene Debs’s veneration for John Brown and lashed out at conservative derogations of the “old man” (Karsner 2:1; Beffel 10). The Liberator founders Crystal and Max Eastman announced in 1918 that their journal, true to its name, would “assert the social and political equality of the black and white races, oppose every kind of racial discrimination, and conduct a remorseless publicity campaign against lynch law” (3). A 1924 pamphlet on Brown by the Liberator editor and Communist Mike Gold stated that “the world would sink into the bog of respectable tyranny and stagnation were there not these fresh, strong ruthless tempests to keep the waters of life in motion” (Gold 60). In the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, the leftist poet Claude McKay published in the Liberator a series of revolutionary poems that linked the violence of oppression with the violence of revolutionary resistance, the redness of blood with the redness of the eastern dawn, and rising tides with mounting revolutionary hopes. Depending on who was writing and who was reading, bloodstained flags, churning waters, and the abiding memory of Kansas and Harpers Ferry carried widely varying signification in immediate postwar years.

The African American radicals who published the major black leftist journals of the day heralded the New Negro as a militant claimant to immediate social equality...
by any means necessary and drew upon the discourse of radical abolitionism. In 1918 A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, editors of the Socialist-aligned Messenger, queried the rationality of Negro patriotism, asserting that “[n]o intelligent American Negro is willing to lay down his life for the United States as it now exists” (Colson 25). The racism of wartime government propaganda was turned against its authors. “The Huns of Germany pale into utter insignificance,” Randolph and Owen wrote with reference to the spate of postwar lynchings and riots, “beside the nameless and indescribable fiendishness of the American HUNS” (5). The Messenger’s cartoons graphically conveyed its political radicalism. One featured armed black men in jeep-like vehicles racing past the Capitol, scattering white supremacists in senatorial-looking garb (“New Crowd” 17). Another showed a lynchee being burned in a flaming American flag (Williams 4). The Caribbean Marxist Wilfrid A. Domingo wrote in 1921 that “millions of oppressed peoples are flocking to the scarlet banner of international Socialism.” “Men like Thomas Dixon,” he warned, “who are fighting Socialism or as they call it Bolshevism, are the same men who exhaust every unfair means to vilify, oppress and oppose Negroes” (22). The Messenger condemned the attempt to erect the “Mammy Monument” and asserted the need for the nation to live up to its stated commitments by seconding the call—initiated by the Friends for Negro Freedom—for John Brown’s birthday to be celebrated as a national holiday. 11

Other black leftist journals stressed the radicalism and militancy of the New Negro still more boldly. Forthright in its rejection of U. S. patriotism—about which the Messenger displayed more ambivalence—was the Crusader, the organ of the Communist-affiliated African Blood Brotherhood, which consistently linked the necessity for a revolt by U. S. workers with the liberation of the world’s peoples of color. The Crusader editor Cyril V. Briggs praised the African American militancy displayed during the Washington 1919 race riot. He exulted, “[Negroes], in true ‘Hell Fighters’ style, . . . were carrying the war into the ‘enemy’s country,’ speeding through the streets of the white quarters in improvised tanks and leaving deadly leaden souvenirs behind” (4). Indeed, Briggs proudly quoted the lament voiced by New York’s Red-hunting Lusk Committee that the capital city’s New Negroes were acting like “[t]he Bolsheviki [who] had a bad habit of getting hold of armored cars and running them through the streets of Petrograd” (5). Deriding “Americanism” as the rule of the KKK and the subordination of “toiling wage slaves” to “capitalists and their political henchmen” (“Americanism” 12), the editors called upon “all red-blooded Negro patriots” to “enlist” in the African Blood Brotherhood (“Fight” 29). Their militarized rhetoric reflected their conviction that the Negro was already at war: with the “new slavery” of debt peonage in the South, with wage slavery in the nation as a whole. Initially skeptical about the willingness of the labor movement to unite white and black workers, the Crusader hailed Bogalusa, noting that the sacrifice performed there “holds as great significance for the 15,000,000 black freedmen and for their white fellow-citizens as held the sacrifice of Harpers Ferry for the chattel slaves of the South and the free laborers of the North” (Moore 140). The implications for another civil war, this one a class war, were near at hand.12

Dubbing Stoddard “one of the few remaining prophets of the white race,” the magazine asked its readers to overlook Stoddard’s “natural prejudices” and to “digests[†] the lessons” of The Rising Tide of Color regarding “the necessity of solidarity, organization and the use or show of force in order to obtain our rightful place in the sun” (“Soviet Successes” 11; original emphasis). What Stoddard foresaw was the “engulfing and destroying [of] European imperialism within the near future. . . . Long live the Russian Soviet, with its noble ideals on self-determination and the rights of weaker peoples” (“Rising Tide” 14). One of the Crusader’s house poets, Ben Burrill, wrote in “The Coming Conflict,” “I should not sing of war, but yet I hear / From the Far East, the Darker Races come. . . . I see them swarm the mountains, range on range, / A hurricane of war, a flaming tide” (6). Reprinting from the Nation

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Franz Boas’s critique of Stoddard’s “complete lack of understanding of the hereditary characteristics of a race” (6), the Crusader rejected the doctrine of African backwardness, arguing that African communitalist societies possessed a “gift” for socialism from which other presumably more advanced societies had much to learn. While occasionally it succumbed to romantic racialism regarding “African blood” (Burrell), the Crusader, more decisively than any black leftist American journal of its day, articulated to its U. S. readers the antiracist and internationalist implications of the Bolshevik Revolution for their time and place.

“John Brown’s body rumbles down the falls”: Jean Toomer, Race, and Revolution

The works of the Washington, D.C.-based writer Jean Toomer testify to the abiding influence of New Negro postwar radicalism, as well as to its figuration of John Brown as symbol of uncompromising antiracist militancy. As he was conceiving the poems and sketches that would be published as Cane, Toomer passionately engaged with experimental modernism, debating the “machine” aesthetic, embracing Waldo Frank’s conception of fictional “spherical form,” and declaring his intention to create “the profound image saturated in its own lyricism” (Letters 92). But this avant-garde rejection of conventional realism did not preclude a radical political commitment: there should be no polarity, he argued in 1921, between an “exquisite image” and a “rousing message.” (Selected 4). Toomer’s first published writing was in fact a “rousing message” addressed to the Nation in May 1919 in support of the postwar workers’ revolutions in Europe (Letters 2). His next three publications all appeared in the Socialist New York Call.13

Toomer’s leftist politics gained clearest expression in a piece titled “Reflections on the Race Riots,” published less than a week after federal troops ended the fighting in the capital city in late July 1919. Noting that African Americans were manifesting “an essentially new psychology, characterized by a fighting attitude,” he dismissed liberal voices that would counsel Negroes to confine their activity to the “extension of constitutional rights” and embraced a forthrightly Marxist analysis of the grounding of racism in the political economy of capitalism:

> It is generally established that the causes of race prejudice may primarily be found in the economic structure that compels one worker to compete against another, and that furthermore renders it advantageous for the exploiting classes to inculcate, foster, and aggravate that competition. . . . Demagogues may storm and saints may plead, but America will remain a grotesque storm-center, torn by passion and hatred, until our democratic pretensions are replaced by a socialized reality. (Toomer, “Reflections” 8)

While Toomer did not specify by what process the “socialized reality” would be brought into being—he appeared not to call for revolutionary violence to counter the violence of the riots—neither did he appear to have confidence in existing political institutions. In prose reminiscent of the Messenger’s commentaries on race riots throughout the summer of 1919, Toomer wrote as a radical New Negro who viewed the negation of capitalism as essential to the achievement of racial equality.14

Toomer retained his commitment to a leftist world view for several years. He mused in his 1922-23 journal that “if the workers could bellow, ‘We Want Power!,’ the walls of capitalism would collapse” (Toomer, Memorandum). In the Cane sketch titled “Seventh Street,” he wrote that “[w]hite and whitewash disappear in blood” (39), evidently alluding to the 1919 Washington riot, and demanded, “Who set you flowin’?” in “Box Seat,” the tale’s protagonist hears the “mutter of powerful underground races . . . rumb[ling] from the earth’s core” (57). Upon completing Cane in
March 1923, Toomer wrote to his publisher, Horace Liveright, that he planned in his next book to represent “this whole black and brown world heaving upward against, here and there mixing with the white. The mixture, however, is insufficient to absorb the heaving, hence it but accelerates and fires it. This upward heaving is to be symbolic of the proletariat or world upheaval. And it is likewise to be symbolic of the subconscious penetration of the conscious mind” (Letters 136-37). In this Freudian supplement to Marx and Lenin, Toomer envisioned multiracial proletarian unity as the catalyst to anticolonial rebellion and world revolution: he evidently aspired to be an apostle of both modernism and social revolution, psychoanalysis and historical materialism. Both the possibilities and the limitations of Toomer’s ambitious aesthetic-cum-political program in the early 1920s are displayed in his 1922 short story, “Withered Skin of Berries.”

Writing to his friend and mentor Waldo Frank in July, 1922, Toomer announced that he had been staying in Harpers Ferry and had been working on a “long piece” that “made use of the . . . opportunity for a vivid symbolism” supplied by its setting (Letters 43). The plot of the story—clearly “Withered Skin of Berries”—revolves around the love choices of a repressed young woman named Vera who, lightskinned enough to “pass,” works as a typist in a segregated government office in the nation’s capital. One suitor, her coworker Carl, is white, passionless, and racist. Another suitor, Art Bond, is black, sensual, and beset by internalized racism. A more successful contestant for her heart and body is David Teyy, a man of mixed heritage, a poet, a radical, and a lover—evidently a projection of Toomer’s idealized vision of himself—who challenges her to overcome her knotted internal state. Place figures crucially throughout the story, which moves from sterile offices and marble monuments of the capital city to history-laden settings along the Potomac, especially the Great Falls downriver from Harpers Ferry. The penultimate scene near the falls features David recalling the hanging of John Brown and the spattering of blood on the river as he, Carl, and Vera stand by a massive boulder associated with an Indian named Tiacomus. The denouement shows Vera back in her office, presumably unable to respond to David’s call. The narration is framed by a repeated paragraph that—thematically recalling Sherwood Anderson’s lonesome grotesques and structurally invoking Waldo Frank’s conception of “spherical form”—describes Vera as an unattainable object of fantasy for both black men and white men who can “only in retrospective kisses . . . know the looseness of her lips . . . pale withered skin of berries” (“Withered Skin” 139, 165). The story’s nonlinear plot, which focuses on issues of racial and sexual identity, features a good deal of driving around the city. It is the tale’s central tropes of rushing water and flowing blood that give coherence, however incomplete, to the characters’ psychological dilemmas and link these with central concerns of New Negro radicalism.

The buildings in the nation’s capital convey a critique of white supremacists’ “100% Americanism.” Vera and Carl drive past Negro laborers who are “working on the basin of an artificial lake that was to spread its smooth glass surface before Lincoln’s Memorial”; notably, “[t]he shadow of their emancipator stir[s] them to neither bitterness nor awe” (“Withered Skin” 141). No wonder: in May 1922 the Lincoln Memorial was dedicated in front of a segregated audience. In the company of both Art and David, Vera rides by the Masonic Temple, the site of frequent segregationist oratory. Art, in her eyes, is “impersonalized . . . in the shadow . . . of its great bulk,” but David points out that she too lives in its shadow (149, 155). The federal office buildings are “grey gastronomic structures, innocuously coated with bile. They pollute the breath of Washington. . . . Routine segregates niggers. Black life is more soluble in lump. White life, pitiably agitated to superiority, is more palatable” (139-40). Toomer’s body politic metaphor reverses Stoddard’s proposition that the mixing of “races” produces national indigestion: here, it is state-sanctioned segregation that creates mass dyspepsia. One of Vera’s coworkers, sure of her ability to spot
Negroes attempting to “pass,” declares that “nigger blood will out . . . You cant fool all of the people all of the time. I wonder if they know that saying of Lincoln's?” (154). Yet these white workers are themselves fooled by a tawdry American dream. They are “[y]oung girls who work all month to imitate leisure-class flappers[,] . . . [w]idows of improvident men who had been somebody in their day[,] [b]oys who have left school[,] [m]en dreaming of marriage and bungalows in Chevy Chase” (153). Toomer apparently shares Dixon’s assessment of Lincoln's racism but draws a different conclusion: where Dixon posits trans-class white supremacist unity as the means to working-class advancement, Toomer portrays white nationalism as falsely suturing class contradiction. 16

Vera’s different suitors limn the differential consequences of segregation for both its victims and its supposed beneficiaries. Her “almost perfect white” (142) coworker Carl wholeheartedly embraces the doctrines of racial supremacy, male superiority, and imperialist domination. Ignoring the “clustered shanties [and] poor white homes” by the roadside, Carl complains that “America, now the war is over, don’t give a young fellow with push and brains and energy half a chance,” cites Vanderbilt, Carnegie, and Rockefeller as his role models, and tells Vera of his plans to go abroad—as soon as his uncle dies and leaves him some money—and get rich off the labor of “greasers” in the “virginal” Argentine (143). But his racism lacks conviction: asked by Vera, “Why do you hate niggers?” he replies, “Hang if I know. Dont you?” (144). His money-lust cannot compensate for his lost connection with the soil: he was a “field man” before his father became an oil trading entrepreneur (143, 147). Carl’s assumption of superiority is further undermined by the haunting memory of his friendship with a darkskinned fellow student in Wisconsin (who turns out to be the redoubtable David Teyy). By the falls that “conjur[e] the sense of an impending lightning,” he recalls Vera David's words during a nocturnal canoeing trip:

“Carl,” he said, his eyes were gleaming, “the wonder and mystery of it . . . Dead leaves of northern Europe, Carl, have decayed for roots tangled here in America. Roots thrusting up a stark fresh life. Thats you. Multi-colored leaves, tropic, temperate, have decayed for me. We meet here where a race has died for both of us. Only a few years ago, forests and fields, this lake, Mendota, heard the corn and hunting songs of a vanished people. They have resolved their individualism to the common stream. . . . Deep River spreads over Mendota.” . . . He closed his hand over mine. Me, a football man, holding hands with a man on the lake. (147)

Carl’s heterosexual Nordicism is patently fragile: he yearns to be immersed in the “common stream” conjoining African American (“Deep River”) and Indian (“Mendota”) cultures. 17

If Carl epitomizes a whiteness ideologically constituted by its repressed other, Art Bond embodies a blackness distorted by racial anxiety. Envious of his rivals’ cars, ill at ease in his dark skin, at once jealous and worshipful of David Teyy—whom he terms a “genius, and the poet of Washington” (141)—the Southern-born Art can express his love for Vera only through his body. But Vera reacts to Art’s sexual approach as a “black wedge of hot red life” and gasps, “Black nigger beast.” Her words return him to slavery: “Art swung loose, and as if a lash had cut him, groaned. . . . Shrinking on a slave-block black man groan!” (152). Displaying the extent to which the lightskinned elite has absorbed the message of “The Birth of a Nation, Vera’s words at once “bond” Art and reveal her own sexual fear. Her lips are pale and withered because they have suppressed the flow of blood.

Yet, just as Carl confesses to be at heart a “field man,” Art tells Vera that he is an “inland man” and lyrically recalls the activities of the “syrup-man”:

He comes to boil the cane when the harvest is through. . . . Men are seated round. . . . They tell tales, gossip about the white folks, and about moonshine licker. . . . The [syrup-man’s] face is lit by the glow. He is the ju-ju man. . . . Your soul rises with the smoke and songs

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above the pine-trees. Once mine rose up, and, instead of travelling about the heavens, looked down. I saw my body there, seated with the other men. As I looked, it seemed to dissolve, and melt with the others that were dissolving too. They were a stream. They flowed up-stream from Africa and way up to a height where the light was so bright I could hardly see, burst into a multi-colored spraying fountain. (151)

Souls rising in pine smoke, ju-ju men, storytellers clustered around the kettle of boiling cane, the David Georgia-esque “syrup-man”: Art’s “out-of-body” experience issues from the imagination that was simultaneously creating Cane. Affirming the communality of African survivals in black folk culture, Art’s vision of the “multi-colored spraying fountain” recalls the “common stream” described by David to Carl. The imagery of water flowing upstream suggests not the “rising tide of color” but the oneness of the world’s peoples. The descriptions of Carl and Art as, respectively, “field man” and “inland man,” rather than white and black, designate not genetic pools or national boundaries but natural locations, as privileged sites of identity.

Both the “field man” and the “inland man” are foils to David Teyy, the man of “multi-colored leaves” who haunts, attracts, and gains carnal knowledge of the woman his rivals desire. Although David is somewhat hard to stomach—Toomer overplays his hero’s sexual, intellectual, and spiritual magnetism—he distills the widely ranging virtues that Toomer wished to pack into his hero. David is the poet who has authored the words that “come unbidden” to Vera’s mind as she passes the War College with Carl—“[F]ar-off trees / whose gloom is rounded like the hives of bees / All humming peace to soldiers who have gone” (141). In its imagistic association of the military cemetery’s trees with hived bees, the poetic fragment suggestively invokes John Brown’s famous plea that Douglass help him “hive the bees” after the raid on Harpers Ferry. More directly, the poem contrasts with Carl’s selfish frustration by the postwar recession, pays tribute to the soldiers lost in the carnage of the recent war engineered by the generals at the War College, and serves as a reminder that the presence of Negroes in Army uniforms had sparked much of the rioting during the “red summer.” The gloomy peace is an ominous one.

Another poem that David chants to his mesmerized listener links the exploitation of black labor with the legal powers of the state and the legitimating role of Christianity:

Court-house tower,
Bell-buoy of the Whites,
Charting the white-man’s channel,
Bobs on the agitated crests of pines
And sends its mellow monotone,
Satirically sweet,
To guide the drift of barges.
Black barges.

African Guardian of Souls,
Drunk with rum,
Feasting on a strange cassava,
Yielding to new words and a weak palabra
Of a white-faced sardonic God— (161; original ellipses)

The poem rearticulates the water imagery informing the memories of Carl and Art in decidedly nonculturalist fashion. No “common streams” and “multi-colored spraying fountains” here: in the zone ruled by the “court-house tower,” African survivals—in the person of the “guardian of souls” turned Christian minister—“yield” to the bidding of a deity who assists in guiding the “black barges” that bear goods down the “white-man’s channel.” David’s poem problematizes Art’s tale of the “syrup-man,” which implies that African identity can compensate for the burdens of racialized exploitation. 18
David’s powers of critique derive from his secure location within modernity, signaled by his organic connection with his car. His association with the natural world and folk cultures—“roots thrusting upward,” Negro spirituals, Indian hunting chants—does not preclude his intimacy with automotive machinery. When David picks up Vera to drive to the falls, she senses that

\[ \text{something from David Tey ran down the steering-gear, down the brakes and clutches, and gave flesh and blood life to the car. Vera was curled, as if she was in the dark enclosure of a womb. She could drive on forever. Covered by life that flowed up the blue veins of the city. Up Sixteenth Street, David was a red blood center flowing down. She sucked his blood. Go on forever with David flowing down. (155)} \]

Phallic propulsion is associated with the liquids coursing through the car that David deftly drives through the neighborhood inhabited by the capital city’s “blue-veined” bourgeoisie. Unambiguously masculine, David also figures androgynously as a mother figure, providing the infantilized Vera with a nurturing womb and liquid to suck. His arterial blood can bring Vera the oxygen she needs because it flows in the opposite direction from that of the elite who take pride in the lightness of their skins. Although linked with the “multi-colored leaves” of the natural world, David is not a primitive but a member of the avant garde who has mastered high-powered machinery like that used during the 1919 race riot by African American residents of the capital city defending their neighborhoods from the invading racists. The vigor of his flowing blood refutes Stoddard’s view that only whites possess the “clean, virile, genius-bearing blood” that can “stream down the ages [and] . . . sweep us on to higher and nobler destinies.” While the historical echoes emanating from David’s lyrics are, admittedly, somewhat faint—his “exquisite images” hardly convey “rousing messages”—these implied correspondences between David’s blood and the city’s circulatory system more clearly situate the story’s commentary on race and racism in recent historical context.

It is the Great Falls of the Potomac that supply the story with both its principal geographical reference point and whatever narrative climax is possible within the constraints of its nonlinear form. When Vera is engaged in racial passing in the company of the white supremacist Carl, she sees the river merely as “churning to a cream foam against mud-colored rocks . . . carrying the brown burden of a wasted sediment . . . John Brown’s body . . . from Harper’s Ferry to the Chesapeake and the sea” (143). Even though the river symbolically displays the social construction of race—the “cream foam” is created through its “churning . . . against mud-colored rocks”—Vera views the river’s “brown sediment”—and, by extension, herself, or at least her “brown” ancestry—as something “wasted,” a “burden,” the dross left at the bottom of the melting-pot. “John Brown’s body” is a fragmented phrase from a forgotten anthem.

When Vera visits the city point along the Potomac in David’s company, by contrast, she beholds a “[m]obile river, scintillant beneath the moon” and is propelled into a confrontation with the history, public and personal, that she has repressed:


Although Vera feels desperate—“Oh God, I dangle. . . . I want to cross over into the camp ground”—she also realizes that “[b]eneath the scum I am a river” (158): the words of the African American spiritual “Deep River” have gained meaning for her. She intuits that her allegiance to her “blue blood” is what “clots” the city’s veins; “red blood” is needed to “wash” the city clean. The “brown sediment of the river,” moreover, flows out to the ocean but then washes back with the tides. Where Stoddard
feared and loathed the rising tide of color, here the mingled waters rise and fall, overcoming “resistant ripples.” And while the Lincoln Memorial and the [Washington] Monument are subjected to “search-lights”—their integrity is suspect, as is their status as representative monuments—the lights that “twinkle” on the wharves of Seventh Street, which further north supplied the hub of the 1919 race riot, signal that this thoroughfare, the longest street in the city, at its southernmost point connects, via the tidal basin, with the Chesapeake Bay, the ocean, and the rest of the world. Where the “artificial lake” under construction in front of the Lincoln Monument has a “smooth glass surface,” reflecting the false peace following the postwar repression, the Potomac is in constant motion. Vera’s awareness that “John Brown’s body rumbles in the sea” signifies, moreover, that the landscape she beholds is not just a geographical site, but a historical process. The continuing material reality of John Brown—his body—has been carried down the violent river of U.S. history and mingled with the rising and falling tides of the modern world.

In conversation with Vera, David is only obliquely political. When he challenges her tendency to “make of love a sort of sublimated postponement,” one that “holds little or no solution for the outside world,” he trails off, “Perhaps in a better day. . . . Especially is this true of the two worlds you dangle over” (159). He later asserts, “The western world demands of us that we not escape” (162). His conjoining of Marx and Freud presumably commits him to some sort of radical social transformation of the “outside”/“western” world (the two are, notably, conflated). David’s tone remains mild, however, until the story’s closing narrative scene, where he feels the need to “stampede these pale ghost people” and confronts Vera and Carl by the falls:

Know you, people, that you sit beside the boulder where Tiacomus made love. Made love, do you understand me? Know you, people, that you are above a river, spattered with blood. John Brown’s blood. With blood, do you understand me? White red blood. Black red blood. Know you, people, that you are beneath the stars of wonder, of reverence, of mystery. Know you that you are boulders of love, rivers spattered with blood, stars of wonder and mystery. Roll river. Flow river. River, river, roll. Roll! The river was empty, flowing to the sea, From Harper’s Ferry to the Chesapeake and the sea— . . . They hung John Brown .

John Brown’s body, rumbles in the river, John Brown’s body, thunders down the falls— . . .Roll river roll!

The boulder seemed clef by a clap of thunder. As if the falls had risen and were thundering its fragments away . . . (164)

The narrative then abruptly shifts scene. The tale’s two closing paragraphs repeat the earlier descriptions of the “slow process of digestion” in the federal offices and the young woman with lips like “withered skin of berries” (164-65). While the requirements of “spherical form” have been fulfilled—the end is in the beginning—from the standpoint of character and plot, the tale’s ending is overly open-ended. How, we wonder, do Carl and Vera respond to David’s fulminations? And why does Vera fail to follow David’s liberatory lead? Viewed as the culmination of the novel’s image-driven patterning, however, David’s speech draws together the story’s key themes and tropes and highlights the radical political vision only adumbrated to this point. David’s final poem is hortatory and direct, far more reminiscent of the didactic poetry published in the Liberator or the Crusader than of the imagist tradition reflected in his earlier chants. Yet the poem builds upon critical concepts embedded in his earlier texts. The spattered blood at Harpers Ferry recalls the “soldiers who have gone”; the reference to Brown’s death by hanging invokes the image of the
“court-house tower” above the “black barges,” underlining the role of state-sponsored violence in ensuring black oppression. David’s invocation of folk traditions also undergoes a metamorphosis. His coupling of the Potomac with the River Jordan—“Roll, Jordan, Roll!”—invites the reader to supply the missing line, “No more driver’s whip for me!” Where David’s previous allusions to the spiritual “Deep River” emphasized the singer’s longing to “go over to Camp Ground,” here he recalls the nonescaipst tradition of slave resistance. Although the slavery of the story’s present is largely slavery of the spirit—the “lash” of racism that Art experiences in Vera’s cruel words, her precarious “dangling” between the reductive categories of racial dualism—it must be contested with the same determination.

David’s insistent reminder that Tiacomus “made love” by the falls—one of the story’s most symbolically freighted but fuzzily articulated elements up to this point—gains in clarity through the coalescence of tropes at the story’s climactic challenge to the historical “whitewash” embodied in the memorials to Lincoln and Washington. David’s demand that his “pale ghost” listeners grant the humanity of the nation’s aboriginal people—who apparently knew more about love than their repressed and race-obsessed successors—takes on resonance in the context of the contemporaneous controversies over the Heyward Shepherd Memorial and the Mammy Monument. If any historical figure metonymically signifies the meaning and heritage of the region, it is Tiacomus, not these iconic faithful slaves. Yet even Tiacomus’s boulder appears to be “cleft by a clap of thunder. . . . [a]s if the falls had risen and were thundering its fragments away”: perhaps all fixed memorials will be swept along in the gathering historical flood. Toomer’s 1919 “Reflections on the Race Riots” comes to mind: “America will remain a grotesque storm center torn by passion and hatred until our democratic pretensions are replaced by a socialized reality.” When Vera and Carl first sat by the boulder, the thunder of the falls “conjured the sense of an impending lightning.” The implied shattering of the boulder by the thundering falls effectively constitutes Toomer’s answer to Woodrow Wilson’s claim that “The Birth of a Nation” was “like writing history with lightning.” Even as Toomer contests revisionary history, he refuses the solace of folkish nostalgia.

The most important feature of David’s closing speech, however, is its synthesis of the trope of blood with that of the river of history through the mediating figure of John Brown. The story’s earlier reference to Seventh Street, the site of carnage in 1919, links past to present: Brown’s prophecy that “the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood” resonates in the thundering falls. But David’s insistence that “white red blood” and “black red blood” have merged in the river of history also recalls the multiracial character of the Harpers Ferry raiders—whose blood was indeed “spattered” where the Shenandoah River merges with the Potomac—as well as Brown’s statement at his trial about the necessary mingling of bloods in the war against slavery. The blended bloods of whites and blacks in the river of history defy the pseudoscientific assertions of the Stoddards and Dixons that “white blood” and “black blood” combine only at the cost of mongrelization. Indeed, David’s statement that the river is “spattered with blood [J] John Brown’s blood. . . . White red blood [J] Black red blood” suggests that “white” blood and “black” blood merge in John Brown himself. But there is only one color of blood, and it is red. In his bold embrace of multiracial solidarity and critique of militarism and exploitation, David embraces the revolutionary outlook embedded in Moore’s declaration that Bogalusa was the Harpers Ferry of the day. That both African Americans and political radicals of all racial backgrounds were the targets of state-sponsored and vigilante violence in the “red summer” of 1919 only attests to the most recent “spattering” of blood in the river of history. The looming presence of Brown attests to the need for renewed abolitionist commitment—and, perhaps, renewed civil war.
I am aware that the dense symbolism and schematic characterizations of Toomer’s “Withered Skin of Berries” do not transparently convey a radical political analysis; strenuous readerly acrobatics are required to make the necessary connections. Toomer's reliance upon extended tropes to bear the freight of social analysis suggests a limit to the role that thematically laden imagery and nonlinear narrative can play in elucidating complex concepts, let alone promulgating activist sentiments. The difficulties Toomer encountered in aligning modernist poetics with a leftist vision of historical change in this 1922 short story may in part suggest why his projected novel—which would have used the trope of “upward heaving” to delineate “the proletariat or world upheaval” in relation to “subconscious penetration of the conscious mind”—was never written. And while the contradictions displayed in “Withered Skin of Berries” are to some degree internal to Toomer the man, they also exhibit conflicting tendencies within the New Negro Movement, which as he wrote was experiencing an increasing split between its culturalist and revolutionary components. The story of that divergence is, in large part, the story of the Harlem Renaissance.

The exploration of these and other biographical and historical narratives—including the immensely complicated matter of Toomer’s own “racial” and class identifications—is clearly beyond the scope of this essay. What I hope to have demonstrated, however, is that Toomer's somewhat confused and confusing 1922 text makes little sense at all unless it is read in the context of the radical upsurge of 1919: the tale's embedded references to blood, humming bees, rising tides, flowing rivers, and capital city geography gain coherence only with reference to the discourses of both radical antiracism and racist antiradicalism current in the postwar years. The centrality of the figure of Brown suggests, moreover, not simply Toomer's personal attraction to the “Old Man” of Pottawatomie Creek and Harpers Ferry but the revived significance of Brown as a symbol of the red line of history in an era when revolutionary hopes briefly flared in the United States and around the world.

In the century and a half after the Harpers Ferry raid, and nearly a century after Toomer penned his story, we may still have something to learn from the “rousing message” that Toomer heard in the Great Falls of the Potomac.

Notes


2. For more on the upsurge of 1919, as well as the dissemination of McKay’s sonnet, see Foley ch. 1. The massacre of hundreds of sharecroppers in Elaine, Arkansas—the most violent episode of the era—is recounted in Robert Whitaker, On the Laps of Gods: The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice That Remade a Nation (New York: Crown, 2008).


4. Stoddard’s dissertation on Haiti was published as The French Revolution in San Domingo (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914). Reluctant to acknowledge the skill and determination of L’Ouverture and Dessalines, as well as of the thousands of slaves engaged in combat, Stoddard argued that the French lost in Haiti largely because of the collapse of the Treaty of Amiens, which forced France into a two-front war (347-48). The racists’ concern with post-Bolshevik Revolution “internationalism” is signaled in Grant’s 1918 edition of The Passing of the Great Race (originally published in 1916), where he added a warning not
only against revolutionaries “intolerant of the limitations imposed by heredity” but also against the “advocates of the obliteration, under the guise of internationalism, of all existing distinctions based on nationality, language, race, religion and class” (Grant xx). For more on postwar racist pseudoscience, see Foley ch. 3.

5. For more on the controversies surrounding the Heyward Shepherd Memorial and the “Mammy Monument,” see, respectively, Micki McElva, “Commemorating the Color Line: The National Mammy Monument Controversy of the 1920s,” in Monuments to the Lost Cause: Women, Art, and the Landscapes of Southern Memory, Cynthia Mills and Pamela H. Simpson, eds. (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2003), 203-28; and Mary Johnson, “An ‘Ever Present Bone of Contention’: The Heyward Shepherd Memorial,” West Virginia History 56 (1997): 1-26. The Shepherd Memorial ended up being erected in 1931; the “Mammy Monument” was never installed. Although Heyward Shepherd was a free black, not a slave, his proposed memorialization clearly was intended to support the discourse of the Lost Cause.

6. Frederick Douglass recounted Brown’s words in The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass; they were subsequently repeated in Du Bois, John Brown, 1800-1859: A Biography Fifty Years After (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), 413. Stoddard’s fear-ridden eugenicist perspective on Brown contrasts dramatically with the portraiture in Hill Peebles Wilson, John Brown, Soldier of Fortune: A Critique (Lawrence: Hill P. Wilson, 1913), which dismisses Brown as a thief and brigand but evinces little fear of his leadership abilities.

7. For more on Dixon’s invocation of European racial categories, see Ronda 72-75. The slit- and shifty-eyed portrayal of Brown recalls the similarly racialized representation of the Socialist demagogue Herman Wolf in the movie “Bolshevism on Trial” (1919), for which Dixon wrote the screenplay. For more on Dixon’s anticommunism, see Anthony Slide, American Racist: The Life and Films of Thomas Dixon (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2004), 127-41.

8. Dixon was fond of this quotation from Lincoln, including it in other novels treating the Civil War, such as The Leopard’s Spots (1906) and The Southerner (1913); see Slide 39-40, 47-48. For more on Dixon’s attempts to bridge class differences through whiteness, see Chris Ruiz-Velasco, “Unity out of Chaos: Whiteness, White Supremacy, and Thomas Dixon, Jr.,” College Literature 34 (2007): 148-65. Stoddard warned of the dangers posed by Bourbonism, noting that within the Nordic branch of the white race talents existed in all classes, if not equally, and that elitism threatened white solidarity (Revolt 226-27).

9. Brown was viewed as a harbinger of later struggles against wageslavery by prominent radicals. In 1861 Karl Marx paired “the movement of the slaves in America started by the death of John Brown” with “the movement of the serfs in Russia” (Marx and Engels 221); in 1885 the International Working People’s Association declared that “[t]he working classes must imitate [Brown]” by “annihilat[ing] . . . the beasts of property and their hordes of adherents” (qtd. in Reynolds 500); in 1907 the Socialist leader and perennial presidential candidate Eugene Debs asked, “Who shall be the John Brown of Wage-Slavery?” (272); in his 1909 biography, Du Bois designated Brown’s desire for “a more just and egalitarian distribution of property” as integral to his abolitionism (281). See also Du Bois’s 1909 essay “John Brown and Christmas,” where he compares Brown with Christ and writes that Brown should “rise from the dead in every Negro-American home. Jesus came not to bring peace but a sword. So did John Brown” (85). Du Bois’s biography of Brown was in print in the late 1910s and early ‘20s and was regularly included in the recommended readings. In the 1962 revision, Du Bois—who had joined the Communist Party—added several pages stressing Brown’s role in presaging worldwide anticolonial rebellion and socialist revolution.

10. The “blood-bathed flag of a new life” had been “unfurled” in once-“Holy” Russia, McKay wrote (“To ‘Holy’ Russia,” Complete 140). “The crimson rides the universal wind . . . the eagles, leaden-winged, are left behind” as “the toilers . . . [b]end to the mighty task . . . [o]f making the earth fit for human living” (“Travail,” Complete 139). He called upon the “sable Samsons” currently “in white prisons bound” to “[s]train mightily until [t]he accursed walls, reared of your blood and tears, / Come crashing, sounding freedom in your ears” (“Samson,” Complete 139). Stoddard’s fear of mounting tides and crumbling dikes was answered by McKay’s celebration of “hungry waters” that “heave mammoth pyramids” in “an eerie challenge to the crumbling shore.” Although the “vigor” of “America,” McKay meditated, “flows like tides into my blood, . . . [and] sweeps my being like a flood,” he looks into the future and beholds, as in Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” the nation’s “granite wonders . . . [l]ike priceless treasures sinking into the sand” (“America,” Complete 153). In his pamphlet “The Negroes in America,” originally published in Russian during McKay’s sojourn in the USSR (1922-23), McKay proclaimed himself an “internationalist” in his analysis of race relations (“Negroes” 4). While McKay did not directly mention Brown in his poems, he alluded to radical abolitionism in his ironic poem “A Daughter of the American Revolution to Her Son” (1926), where the speaker bemoans the fact that “your great grandfather once went wrong, / Becoming radical in slavery days” (Complete 211). For more on the relationship between McKay and Gold at the Liberator, see chapter 1 of William J. Maxwell, New Negro, Old Left: African American Radicalism and Communism between the Wars (New York: Columbia UP, 1999).
Toomer was composing “Withered Skin of Berries,” which he sent to Lola Ridge of Letters FRICAN AMERICAN REVIEW. For a discussion of the impact of Wilsonian segregation on the postwar polarization of racial categories, see Joel Williamson, Caribbean Crusaders of the Harlem Renaissance (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2005), and Winston James, Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America (London: Verso, 1998).


14. Toomer’s Call article greatly expanded upon a short letter that Toomer wrote to the Nation on June 29, 1919, in which he responded ironically to an editorial of June 14, 1919, that criticized the “fighting psychology of the Negro” (Letters 2-3). Toomer’s other Call articles were “Ghouls” (15 June 1919), a critique of war profiteering, and “Americans and Mary Austin” (10 Oct. 1920), a critique of cultural nativism.

15. Toomer sent the same description of his projected novel to Waldo Frank (Letters 138). While Toomer scholars have generally concluded that Toomer’s interest in socialism flagged after his two-week stint in a New Jersey shipyard in late 1919, Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr persuasively demonstrate the longer duration of his interest in radical politics in Jean Toomer and the Terrors of American History (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1998). “Seventh Street” was composed around the same time as “Withered Skin of Berries,” since Toomer sent it to Lola Ridge of Broom sometime before mid-August 1922 (Letters 63).


17. The character of Carl may be based on a “bigot” whom Toomer knew at the University of Wisconsin (Box 20, F. 1513, Jean Toomer Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University). For a reading of the story’s queer implications, see Siobhan B. Somerville, Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), 146-49.

18. The poem is an extended version of “Conversion” in Part One of Cane, which contains only the five lines starting with “African Guardian of Souls” (26). David notes that he composed the poem two years previously (157). The overlap between character and author suggests that Toomer may have written it in 1920, in the immediate aftermath of the war.

19. The term “blue veins” refers to skin light enough for veins to show through. The term was used to designate the mulatto elite. For a discussion of that elite, to which Toomer belonged from birth, see Willard B. Gatewood, Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920 (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990).

20. In the July 19, 1922, letter to Frank, Toomer noted the “strain of Indian blood” in the population around Harpers Ferry (Letters 43).

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