“Tortured Shadows: Representations of Lynching in Modernist U.S. Poetry”

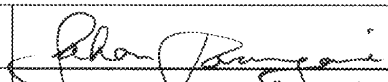
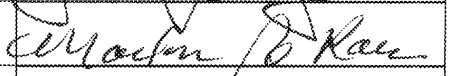
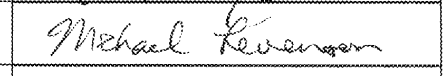
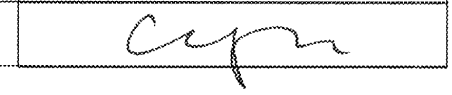
Milton Lamont Welch
Raleigh, NC

A.B. philosophy, Vassar College, 1999
M.A. Liberal Arts, St. John’s College, Annapolis, 2001

A Dissertation presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English Language and Literature

University of Virginia
January, 2007

Jahan Ramazani	
Marlon B. Ross	
Michael Levenson	
Claire Chi-ah Lyu	

Abstract:

In “Tortured Shadows: Representations of Lynching in the Modernist U.S. Poetry,” I examine the role of modernist lynching figures in U.S. poetry. These figures developed both in and apart from protest traditions of modernist poetry in the United States, and I emphasize both traditions as vital sites both for counter-articulations to the traumatic social impact of lynching and for resisting its ideological grounding. Without much political investment in the social question of lynchings, such poets as T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound represent lynching while invoking anxieties about their own identities as poets. Among traditions of protest, poets stir readers to political activism by encoding in the representation of lynching strategies of active individual and communal resistance. I term this strategy of protest and conversion didactic. Modernist protest poetry is often didactic, offering instruction in order to convert readers into social activism. Rather than appeals to social identity in protesting lynching, this protest poetry comes to depend on affective figures of lynch victims, figures, that is, of emotional identification.

This study analyzes modernist lynching figures in non-protest poetry, but is chiefly a literary history of the evolving strategies of protest involving modernist lynching figures in poetry. This history spans the origins of this protest in the poems of Frances E. W. Harper down through the protest work of Jewish, socialist, and black poets. I argue that modernist lynching figures embody social critiques of lynching and strategies of resistance to its traumatizing force. I open and close this study with examples drawn from outside the protest tradition because I argue throughout that the

evolving modernist lynching figure of the protest tradition resonates with the static modernist lynching figure from outside the protest tradition.

Above all, this dissertation bears the mark of all four readers comprising my dissertation committee, and I gratefully and warmly acknowledge the work done by each member of my dissertation committee on behalf of shaping and refining this dissertation: Jahan Ramazani, Marlon Ross, Michael Levenson, and Deborah McDowell are responsible for the best parts of this study. After this difficult process, I reserve special thanks for my director, Jahan Ramazani, for offering unfailing encouragement and much patience even before the dissertation, and for my second reader, Marlon Ross, for extended conversations throughout the process and an indispensable series of improvements in this study's last stages. Additionally, I want to thank Caroline Rody and Raymond Nelson, for pointing out texts and readings; Eric Lott, for early input on this project and encouragement; and Mark Edmundson, for lending a sympathetic ear to this graduate student. Special thanks goes to Hampshire College's School of Humanities, Arts and Cultural Studies and the Five Colleges, Inc. for a dissertation fellowship, in particular Flavio Risech and Aaron Berman. For helping improve the forth chapter many thanks go to Michael Coyle, Steven Yao, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Massimo Baciagalupo, and while the third chapter especially benefited from Mitch Miller's useful comments at a lecture given at Vassar College under the auspices of The Department of English. Finally, I extend thanks to my colleagues at North Carolina State University, especially Gene Melton for gracious editing in the eleventh hour. This dissertation is dedicated to the Pearl Bailey and Virgil I. Grissom Branches of the Newport News Public Library System, where I went to read growing up.

1: Modernist Lynching Figures in U.S. Poetry

Poetry's "Bitter Logic" of Violence

Violence and commemoration of the human body inaugurate major poetic traditions of the West and Near East. In the modernist era of western poetry the ties among violence, the body, and poetry have remained, and poetic work in the United States has proliferated in vivid instances of bodily violence, especially lynching. Poet Allen Grossman calls the dialectic of violence behind poetic representation "bitter logic": "Discourse, like consciousness, is built—and made strong—by distinction. Such is the 'bitter logic' of poetic practice actualized as violence—the violence of religion, race, class, and gender all driven by the engine of distinction—which representation, nonetheless, requires" (9). As lynching consolidated into racist national violence in the U.S., figures of lynched bodies emerged at the heart of U.S. poetry's bitter logic; in poetry, lynching was both the subject of protest and a structural figure. In protest bitter logic grounded figures of lynching instrumentally, as figures aiming to stir apathy into activism, a literary motive I call <u>didactic</u>. By didacticism I mean more than teaching. Didacticism is teaching as proselytizing, teaching with a psychagogic aim of political conversion. Thus, didactic poetry aims at political conversion as much as either social action or knowledge. In the modernist period, a structural lynching figure emerged both within and outside traditions of protest. This figure resembles Allen Grossman's "eidetic check" which "[establishes] a limit to violence at the point of the effacement of the human image" (170). Modernist lynching figures specifically check the ambitions of the

lynching imagination: the annihilation or—as Trudier Harris termed it—exorcism of blackness.

Poetry reifies the human form as sacrosanct beyond the taking of human life as an eidetic check, or so Allen Grossman explains the term; in poetry (by nature a measure of transcendence[1]) the lifeless human form rehearses the sacredness of human life because the lifeless human body may be commemorated as an affective figure. According to Grossman, the paradigm of the eidetic check is in Book 24 of Homer's Iliad, where Apollo preserves Hector's dead body from "outrage" ("αεκειην" 24.18)—its wounds heal and Achilles vainly attempts to injure it. Grossman argues that the eidetic check at the origin of Western poetic culture fuses with poetic culture and becomes a principle of poetic history (though not of political history). What remains at stake, then, in the relationship between literary language and the representation of the body under the outrages of lynching is "the imagebility and commemorability of the person [as] accomplished by acts of violence" (173). What is the relationship between U.S. poetry and the ideologies that ground the act of lynching? Does this poetry help us remember lynching and its victims less or more effectively? Less or more traumatically?

If Grossman's eidetic check is a "reaffirmation of the transcendental ground of the person" (176), in the modernist period this reaffirmation is an affective function that operates against the annihilation of blackness through figures of identification with black bodies. Grossman claims this eidos was disabled in the post-modern nuclear age with the

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[1] Grossman is, I believe, in sympathy with the definitive statements on this issue: Martin Heidegger's essays "The Origin of the Work of Art" and "What are Poets For?" In the former essay, in particular, Heidegger identifies the experiential recognition accompanying acts of naming as a poetic function in all language, a function that defines transcendence: "Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings *to* their being *from out of* their being" (73).

epoch's sudden potential for total destruction. Modernist lynching figures, however, function eidetically as active registers of somatic identification and transfer. Reading modernist figures of lynched bodies as sites of these processes shows how activist poets in the modernist era evince evolving joint strategies of protest, and also how the poetry counters the dehumanizing trauma of racist violence by preserving the experience of the African-American body as an image of the human,[2] indeed the epitome of humanness.

Modernist lynching figures emerged in poetry that already marshaled resistance to lynching's oppressive power and chronicled witness to this oppression in the form of didactic protest. Early traditions of black protest writing ground the didactic mode: "Although denied a political voice in national [affairs,] black authors produced a wide range of literature to project their views into the public sphere. Autobiographies and personal narratives told of slavery's horrors; newspapers and essays railed against racism in its various forms; and poetry, novellas, reprinted sermons, and speeches preached an ethos of national redemption" (Pamphlets ix). Didactic protest of lynching in poetry originates in this ethos of national redemption, while the modernist lynching figures emerge later. When this ethos of national redemption grew into one of interpersonal sympathy and interracial encounters, protest modes also started using lynching figures affectively; any modernist lynching figure, therefore, is potentially a figure of protest.

While didactic lynching figures are exclusively oriented to protest, protest and non-protest traditions contribute to the shape of the modernist lynching figure. To study these figures of lynching bridges divides—racial, cultural, artistic—in poetics by defining

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[2] Therefore, despite my occasional recourse to rhetorical terms this figure should be seen as an instance of what Emmanuel Levinas calls language's "expressive function" which links language to the "*revelation* of the other" (Levinas 73), rather than of what he calls rhetoric, "propaganda, flattery, diplomacy" which "is preeminently violence, that is, injustice—[violence] exercised on [a] freedom, which, precisely as freedom should be incorruptible" (70).

the taxonomy of a poetic figure fundamentally predicated on resisting a crucial homogenizing imperative of lynching: annihilating the presence and threat of blackness in America. Two immediate differences, then, distinguish this study of lynching from literary studies of lynching so far: 1) I focus on poetry as a compelling, largely unexplored genre in which the literary representation of lynching uniquely develops. Heretofore in studies of lynching and literature, "literature" has been taken as synonymous with narrative prose forms and except for Jacqueline Goldsby's recent book, poetry has been wholly ignored, despite much poetry being inexplicable without discussion of narrative properties. Any comment on literature's relevance to other topics is, however, provisional—and generically provincial—unless both narrative and lyric forms are taken into account. In this case, ignoring poetry risks neglecting the role of poetic functions in social discourse: missing that the very term "lynching," as we shall see, derives its meaningfulness from the poetic function of ordinary language to create literal language from figurative terms. 2) I am motivated by the potential of literature's structural resistance to historical ideologies rather than its thematic complicity. Anthropologist Victor Turner, a key source for Robert Stepto's seminal study Beyond the Veil, puts such resistance at the heart of any "processual" or evolutionary account of human society: "[The] besetting quality of human society, seen processually, is the capacity of individuals to stand at times aside from the models, patterns, and paradigms for behavior and thinking, which as children they are conditioned into accepting, and, in rare cases, to innovate new patterns themselves or to assent to innovation" (Turner 15). In Turner's sense, my study is "processual," a literary history of lynching's representation rather than a historical genealogy of lynching's oppression. My concern is how literature

may constitutionally resist enabling forces of ideology in ways overlooked or, worse, invisible to such genealogies. Up to now, literature has been taken mainly as a palimpsestic record of historical oppression, by nature complicit with the times and largely without social and historical agency.[3] Yet the very nature of protest writing exploits literature's ideological capacity for synchronic resistance, an ability to write against the times. Protest harnesses energies that pit writing against its milieu, but these energies are by no means otherwise dormant in all other cases.

Apart from Protest

In the rich history and range of the protest tradition in U.S. lynch poetry, the modernist lynching figure innovates the representation of lynching, and in doing so contributes to the abiding redolence of lynching in U.S. literature even as its social threat has shrunken.[4] But this redolence derives as much apart from U.S. protest traditions as within them. The appearance of these modernist lynching figures within and outside protest traditions derives from a moment in U.S. modernism "when at least some Harlem writers sought an alliance with their white compatriots in the modernist avant-garde, albeit a modernist avant-garde rather different from the one that Eliot had come to represent" (North 127). Michael North's statement makes sense insofar as Eliot cannot

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[3] Even Sandra Gunning, who suggests in Race, Rape, and Lynching that writing may contain the "discursive possibility" of "rupture" with "a seamless body of American attitudes" (9), does not go so far as to present literary discourse as a site in which the attitudes are challenged outright.

[4] Which is not to say vanished, e.g. the brutal spectacle attacks on James Byrd, Yusuf Hawkins, and Matthew Shepard in the 1980's and 1990's. Yet lynching is no longer a realistic fear for most young black southerners, and the most commonly mentioned invocations of lynching in the past twenty years of U.S. society are not Byrd or Shepard, but Justice Clarence Thomas's remark about his confirmation hearings (see Markovitz), and the group associated with rap artist Ice Cube. Recent American literature has, however, produced powerful engagements with the subject of lynching: Leon Forrest's There is a Tree More Ancient than Eden and Divine Days both center on scenes of lynching; Clarence Major's Brutal Imagination explores the criminalized black male of American popular imagination; Thylias Moss has written a number of poems, including "Glory" and "The Lynching," that have explored lynching imagery; and Leslie Marmon Silko's novel Ceremony contains a brutal scene of lynching.

be appropriated into U.S. protest traditions, and hence be seen as allied with a group of writers who can. North nevertheless undervalues the extent to which Eliot's racial masquerade does more than "confirm the standard [of racial stereotypes] even in deviating from it" (79). Rather, the anxieties this masquerade embodies are an anxiety of influence, a fear of having already identified too strongly with black culture. The posturing of his private uses of dialect avoids this fear while instantiating it—Eliot tries to laugh off what North quotes him as describing as his "nigger drawl" while laboring to replace this drawl with a British accent. It is uneasy laughter, and outside protest traditions, such anxieties and identifications enable the eidetic function of lynching figures.

While Pound's *Pisan Cantos* has, as we will see, the most thoroughly compelling modernist lynching figure outside protest traditions, modernist lynching figures structure ulterior principles in the work of even so unusual a suspect as T.S. Eliot. His early reliance on imagery of the "hanging man" is, for instance, much invested in invoking blackness and mimicking African-Americans, even as his invocation of Anglo-Saxon cultural identity holds an anxious relationship to the figure of the African cenotaph (North 83-87). As North explains, the "African cenotaph also reveals a deep and very personal fear" for Eliot of "placelessness [and] lack of identity" (84). Yet as an anxiety of influence, the fear is not of lack of identity, as we shall see, but of an all too powerfully recognized <u>grounding in blackness</u>. Significant moments of Eliot's work are more than "another modernist making [an] Africanist sound" (DuPlessis 97) because Eliot expresses these personal anxieties "by the fantasy of being black" (North 84). This fantasy adds a stratum of meaning to Eliot's later work when, for instance, the Chorus

opens Part II of Murder in the Cathedral asking: "Does the bird sing in the South?" (II.1), anticipating the lynch-like spectacle attack on Thomas à Beckett. This fantasy also underlines the appearance of the hanging man in Eliot's work as eidetic, a modernist lynching figure because the speaker somatically identifies with the hanging figure while uncannily positioning himself as a poetic voice through his experience of a lynched black body.

This lynching figure is at work as early as The Waste Land. While few meanings are definite in this poem, the triple invocation of the hanged man, the fearful principle of sexual energy connoted by water, and the large anonymous crowd suggests one contemporaneous scene Eliot/Pound preserves in the poem may be that of lynching. In this work of arranged fragments, the poem moves from Madame Sosostris's tarot reading to Dante's limbo with ambiguity-making effect:

> I do not find
>
> The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.
>
> I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring. (54-56)

In this first section of the poem figures of drowning are sexual, but speak ironically of desolation—the drowning land is not fecund but barren, and where fertile also threatened by the imposition and expectations of female sexuality. In the moment, female sexuality evokes a trace of the lynching scene as that scene often purports organization around defense of female sexual honor or vengeance for its perceived or actual loss. The Hanged man goes unseen, but though the crowd is "walking round in a ring" in imitation of Dante, it is also as if some spectacle rivets its collective attention.

In “Hollow Men,” Eliot repeats this image as Britain’s Guy Fawke’s celebration, speaking in the first person. There the “Shadow” of the ultimate section has a racial connotation underscored by the speaker of the poem’s epigraph. “Like [Joseph Conrad’s Mr.] Kurtz himself, who is described in Heart of Darkness as a paste board mask, a hollow figurine, Eliot’s speaker suffers the utter loss of identity that comes from crossing the line that delimits races” (North 86). North equates Eliot’s speaker with Mr. Kurtz, as if Kurtz represents an effacing of racial boundaries rather than a consolidation of white social power and prestige, a consolidation augmented by distinguishing proximity to blackness rather than combination with it. This poem’s “lost / Violent souls” are types of Mr. Kurtz, and cannot be divorced from the situation of Heart of Darkness, but these souls are also unrealized and not to be confused with Kurtz either. Rachel Blau DuPlessis seems much nearer the mark:

> The horror is in us, says Eliot; we are Africa, just as Conrad said; this is an incorporative, haunted confrontation making whiteness an ambiguous social position filled with powerless superiority because flooded with the energies and demands of the dark instinctual. (105)

“Hollow Men” is eidetic because its speaker requires a somatic commemoration of the lynched black body for the meaningfulness of his voice. This “hollow” speaker is hung and aflame in the manner of the black lynch victims of the day, and not merely after the manner of Guy Fawkes, which may have resonated for Eliot due to lynching’s prevalence in the United States. The imagined position, then, is not wholly a “loss of an identity once underwritten by secure racial boundaries” (North 87), but an assertion of the very conditions of Eliot’s own white identity. Furthermore, the “shade without color”

signifies a somatic burden of blackness eidetically filling and defining the hollow men as their white identity.[5]

Wallace Stevens is also outside protest traditions of modernist poetry but uses a figure of lynching eidetically, this time asserting a social identity of vocation rather than race. DuPlessis remarks that in Wallace Stevens's early career "the American south and its black inhabitants are in a special category of address, occurring in twenty or more poems or sections in long poems" (119). She goes on to explain:

> Stevens is exhilarated at his invention of black figures whose imagined activities open the terrain of poetry for him; these dusky words are sensual, creative, fertile, potent. Thus black figures are muses, through whom and because of whom poetic authority accrues. (119)

Stevens's black figures reify his poetic gifts, with the black body as an affective, eidetic function of poetic language. The most striking example of this process occurs in Stevens's brief, 1916 poetic drama "Three Travelers Watching a Sunrise." The action of this drama reveals a hanging body in a tree adjacent to a group of Chinese picnickers. The audience sees the body in the first moments of the drama when one of the drama's "two negroes" glimpses it:

> *When the curtain rises, the stage is dark. The limb of the tree creaks. A negro carrying a lantern passes along the road. The sound is repeated. The negro comes through the bushes, raises his lantern and looks through the trees. Discerning a dark object among the branches, he*

[5] The speaker's debilitating lust for Dante's Beatrice mimics in some sense what Paul Laurence Dunbar calls "the old, old crime" (13) in his poem the "Haunted Oak."

> *shrinks back, crosses the stage, and goes out through the wood to the left.* (149)

The reaction of the negro in the scene imbeds the expectation that this dark object is indeed a body, in fact a lynched and hanging black body. For Stevens, though, the very title of the drama ironizes the action of the play, and this irony depends on the modernist lynching figure as an expression of poetic gifts. In discussing the role of lynching in the play, DuPlessis astutely observes:

> The anxiety and terror of lynching seem to be encoded in this body, physically visible on the stage yet emotionally and politically hidden as a concern for the play. The apparatus, including the tree, is quite similar to materials in many African-American [poems.] It is uncanny to have lynching present visually, but ignored narratively. (117-118)

The uncanny nature of this shadowed figure for lynching is striking, and underscores the eidetic quality that structures the lynching figure through transpositions of meaning in the play's poetry. This play does not present lynching that it may become an occasion of commentary for the author or a stirring elicitation of sympathies from the audience, but these transpositions of lynching remain integral to the play's structure. I revise DuPlessis in seeing the action of the play as organized by the literal shadow of lynching, and hence by the revelation of the hanging figure as in fact neither lynched nor black.

The conversation of the "three Chinese" only seems irrelevant to the allusion to lynching. The lynching/non-lynching organizes the entire action of the drama; though the crucial moment of the drama erases the allusion to lynching, the audience must learn through the conversation of the Three Chinese on stage that the dark figure in the tree has

not been lynched. The opening lines of the play initiate an interplay of reference and transposition that identifies the hanging shadow with poetic revelation:

> All you need
>
> To find poetry,
>
> Is to look for it with a lantern. (1-3)

Oblivious to the dark figure in the tree at this point, the conversation of the Chinese uncannily scripts the revelations of sunrise. The comment about looking for poetry with a lantern parallels the immediately preceding moment, drawing its meaning for the audience from the action they have just witnessed—a negro who "look[ed] for it with a lantern," "it" in his case not poetry, but the "dark object," the allusive lynching. The equation between "it," the hanging body, and poetry, however, suggests an eidetic function is already at work. One's very impression of lynching is tellingly associated with poetry.

Stevens counterpoints the obliviousness of the Three Chinese toward the figure with a deliberate dramatic focus on a porcelain water jug. The contrast would be plainer in a staged performance—white object in foreground/dark body in the background. Enhancing the juxtaposition, the porcelain exactly suggests an eidetic principle structuring human experience: "There is a seclusion of porcelain/ That humanity never invades" (39-40). If the porcelain and the body are related thematically, they are also related in their mutual remove—one announced, the other staged—from the conversants. Revealing the body as in fact not a lynching is dramatic irony. This irony, however, only completes the analogy of the Second Chinese between sunrise and the candle's glare on the porcelain:

> The point of difference from reality
>
> Is this:
>
> That, in this illustration,
>
> The earth remains of one color—
>
> It remains red,
>
> It remains what it is.
>
> But when the sun shines on the earth,
>
> In reality
>
> It does not shine on a thing that remains
>
> What it was yesterday.
>
> The sun rises
>
> On whatever the earth happens to be. (49-60)

This statement ties sunrise to mutable perceptions at dusk: insofar as the porcelain has an eidetic form it checks a reality subject to the flux of temporality. The Third Chinese responds, “And there are indeterminate moments / Before it rises” (61-62), adding the further dramatic irony: “Like this” (63). The three figures of the title are not the Three Chinese—who are after all three of six figures watching a sunrise in the play—but rather three sets of figures, each set defined in relationship to the lynching figures operating as the meaning of the drama: the dramatis personae, who converse unaware of the body in the tree; the audience, for whom the dark body indicates lynching; and the poet whose silent invocation of lynching is orchestrated finally as an erasure.

The Origins of “Lynching”

The modernist representation of lynching is a special contribution to the study of U.S. lynching because poetic language occupies a unique place in the motive to lynch. Though lynchings are real and brutal acts of racist violence, the term “lynching” literalizes a figurative term, and so lynching has always been tied to the imagination in the United States. “Lynching” originates as a figure for Charles Lynch’s violent form of extra-legal extremism, itself a volatile mixture of patriotic moralism and sadistic cruelty invoked in an angry, grassroots maintenance of U.S. social conformity. This antebellum symbolism ignites modern social and literary imaginations because lynching as a figurative term signifies the maintenance of conformity, and hence signifies more widely than is suggested by the sociologist Jonathan Markovitz, who has argued “[lynching] was always intended as a metaphor for, or a way of understanding, race relations” (xvi).

Lynching in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is usually distinguished from its eighteenth-century version, but the very earliest versions of lynching imbricate the imagination in shaping what Markovitz calls the “cultural memory” of lynching. Literary historian Jacqueline Goldsby is right to say lynching is “an act and a sign, a literal thing and a symbolic representation” (42) because as a term of speech “lynching” has been literalized. As philosopher Nelson Goodman explains, such figurative meanings often form the basis of literal terms: “Current literal use of many a term has been specialized from an initial, much broader application. [What] seems a new use of a term may then consist of reapplying over a region earlier vacated; and the way a term or schema applies there may depend upon half-conscious recollection of its earlier

incarnation" (76). This point of linguistics applies to the term "lynching" because the term derives from one man's early practice of enforcing social conformity on the nascent communities of this nation. The term retains its earliest symbolism and etymological trace while changing in important ways: utterly different in practice, lynching remains the same in purpose and name. Lynching involves race after Emancipation because more than a century later, whites sought to control or eliminate blacks, who embodied a basic nonconformity with the white populace.

The first version of lynching derives from the American tradition of vigilantism that Philip Dray argues was part of the American Revolution, as he says "a vigilantes' war" (20). Out of this war emerged the excommunicated Quaker, Charles Lynch, from whom the name of lynching derives.[6] Lynch's impromptu court jailed and punished thieves and Tories with the later approval of the Virginia legislature, first users of the phrase "Lynch Law" as "Lynch's Law" (Dray 21). In fact, in the Virginia town of Altavista, Charles Lynch's home—Green Hill, now called Avoca, site of the original "lynching" tree —remains a tourist site associated with the Revolutionary War (www.avocamuseum.org).

Charles Lynch himself first coined the verb "to lynch" as a metaphor for his own actions: "Charles Lynch's decision to turn his own name into a verb suggests a preference for political will, force of personality, and knowledge of the good over institutional solutions, due process, and other attributes of constitutionalism" (Waldrep 18). Furthermore, in metaphorizing his name, Lynch makes "lynching" an icon for the value

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[6] That lynching originates with Charles Lynch is the general consensus of several generations of historical scholars, yet there are many stories and legends behind the story of lynching. James Cutler offers the most complete catalogue of which I know in Lynch Law An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States.

of social conformity and ideological homogeneity, validating the importance of pursuing life, liberty, and property by trumping this pursuit in self-selected mobs. Christopher Waldrep reads the term "lynching" as a figure of "the fundamental tension in American life between politics and the Constitution, between seeking good over procedural values and institutional constraints" (18), what he also calls "'establishment violence' performed outside the technical letter of the law, but done by a member of the governing elite" (19). By implication "the governing elite" is that part of the social order most menaced by nonconformity for it has gained the most from customary social-forms, and therefore is most ready to assert the values embedded in the term "lynching."

In the eighteenth century, lynching had not yet become associated with violent, racist death, though Charles Lynch's early description of his actions provides us with its first report: "Shot one, Hanged one, and whipt several" (Waldrep 15). The racist transformation occurred after lynching migrated to the western frontiers of the United States. Dray tracks this migration in the following manner, "The first widespread application of Lynch's Law [was] associated with the so-called Regulators of the early nineteenth century [that operated] in sparsely peopled areas of North Carolina, Kentucky, and Indiana" (21). William Carrigan has shown how a "culture of lynching" sympathetic to forms of violence meting out justice beyond the law's jurisdiction developed farther west in Texas: "Texas increasingly came to be seen during the nineteenth century as a frontier region inhabited by quick-thinking men capable of taking justice into their own hands" (24). For Waldrep, this spread of lynch law is directly linked to migration patterns of early Virginian veterans:

> Virginia veterans of the Revolutionary War familiar with Colonel Lynch's methods began fanning out across the continent even before the war came to an end. [Two-thirds] of Virginia's revolutionary veterans who lived long enough to apply for pension left their home state. In their pension applications, some of the veterans remembered serving under Colonel Lynch. (22)

As lynching spread beyond Virginia it became more violent, and directed variously against Mexicans, African Americans, Native Americans and even other whites. The watershed year for modern lynching occurred in 1835 with two lynchings in Mississippi: the first occurred in Madison County in response to a (possibly imagined) slave revolt; the second in Vicksburg, a rampage of citizens against local gamblers (Dray 23-24). It is at this point that lynching entered the national consciousness through media coverage: "Before the Vicksburg incident, lynching was not widely seen in print; thereafter it became common, a 'sensation.' [The] Vicksburg hangings seized the nation's attention, providing fodder for debate over the role of popular sovereignty, the people's right to take to the streets" (Waldrep 27). Lynching, therefore, enters the national consciousness as a media sensation, which is to say an event that is <u>represented</u> to national consciousness through essays, debate, and journalism.

Grace Hale ties the outgrowth of this "sensation," twentieth-century spectacle lynchings, to modernity in the South: "Lynching was the brutal underside of the modern South, the terrifying and yet for whites also perversely titillating practice and increasingly mediated narrative that made the culture of segregation work and even seem sane" (228). More recently Goldsby has expanded that claim nationally, arguing that "anti-black

lynching [was] a phenomenon symbolic of its time [and that] its power to oppress African-Americans was intensified by its relations to cultural developments we ordinarily categorize as 'modern'" (25). For Goldsby, lynching has a cultural logic which fits into U.S. modernity, determining its aim and viciousness, but also its acceptance and the forms resistance to lynching takes. Hale claims that "[s]ince southern blacks rarely attended public lynchings, their knowledge of all these extralegal killings remained paradoxically distant and perhaps fantastic" (204). In claiming such distance, however, Hale leans too far to suggesting that blacks failed to know what went on at these lynchings, when disseminating such knowledge was part of the point. The same can be said of blacks as of Northern (and many Southern) whites, however: most of them relied on word of mouth or media accounts for the lived tragedy of the Southern lynch era. The media accounts were generated during and after what Goldsby calls "late-nineteenth century journalism's expanded hegemony as a curator of public knowledge" (48). Without direct access to lynchings—and such access was not limited to Southerners or even whites—the very knowledge of lynching in public and literary writings was shaped by national imagining of the experience. I do not want to imply that this knowledge was inaccurate, but as a consequence, the impact, trauma, and threat of lynching is characterized as much by the reality of these things as by the manner in which that reality preoccupied the U.S. imagination.

Francis E. W. Harper and Lynching in Protest Poetry

By 1894, the popular acceptance of vigilantism and violence outside the bounds of the law that a young Abraham Lincoln had called "mobcratic spirit" had returned to

the South, and become entrenched as what Frederick Douglass in a letter prefacing Ida B. Wells-Barnett's Red Record would call "the lynch abomination now generally practiced against colored people in the South" (57). Wells-Barnett opens this same tract describing an America where in places of the South the lynching of blacks was common, while the rest of the country remained largely indifferent to the vicious act: "The student of American sociology will find the year 1894 marked by a pronounced awakening of the public conscience to a system of anarchy and outlawry which had grown during a series of ten years to be so common, the scene of unusual brutality failed to have any visible effect upon the humane sentiments of our land" (57). Ida B. Wells-Barnett has been credited with "found[ing] both the study of lynching and anti-lynching activism" (Hale 22). Indeed, even as Wells-Barnett's writings mark the start of organized national and international resistance to this "national crime" (64), Wells-Barnett's skill and eloquence as an essayist mark one of the earliest instantiations of lynching as a literary concern in American writing. With her ferocity and international profile, Ida B. Wells-Barnett established lynching protest as a genre of literary prose writing.[7]

As Wells-Barnett established the genre in prose, Frances E. W. Harper established lynching protest as a compelling national genre of poetic writing. Always a poet of social consciousness, Frances E. W. Harper founds lynch poetry and lynching protest in two lyrics of 1894: "An Appeal to my Country Women" and "The Martyr of Alabama." These first major lynch poems are in my sense didactic, protesting apathy among the U.S. white population and calling for national redemption in chastising tones while

[7] Ann P. Rice correctly cites Charles Chesnutt's 1889 short story "Sheriff's Children" as preceding Ida B. Wells's work, but the story is fiction, and the lynching is thwarted by the brave actions of stalwart Sheriff Campbell. Also, the title of the story suggests the focus is Campbell's son, fathered illegitimately with a black woman. While white male sexual excess is a prominent theme in lynching protest, even this seems unrelated to the story's lynching.

instrumentally[8] representing lynching as a problem the consequences of which they are unaware. In her "Appeal" Harper protests the narrow concerns of privileged white women in the United States whose global humanitarianism excludes domestic victims of racist violence. The impressionistic gesture toward lynching in the poem sanctions the final inversion of sufferings, the damning consequence of white women's apathy:

> When we plead for the wrecked and fallen,
>
> The exile from far-distant shores,
>
> Remember that men are still wasting
>
> Life's crimson around our own doors. (28-32)

Spilling blood is Harper's image for lynching in the poem. Equally significant is Harper's "we" that stresses her protest as a patriotic sentiment. Her protest stirs women of her country: "But hark! from our Southland are floating / sobs of anguish, murmurs of pain" (17-18). Her collective "our" implies that the United States is a shared possession: coming from a black woman's pen, this collectivity affirms Harper's equal share, however harried this claim may have become in the social circumstances the poem protests.

Harper's protest addresses the women of her country, specifically white women Harper calls "my favored sisters" (33) and "my well-sheltered sisters" (46). The appeal's central petition puts these women's racial sympathies into play, addressing their gender identification and religious convictions:

> And women heart-stricken are weeping
>
> over their tortured and their slain.

[8] "Instrumentally" indicates that the scenario of the poem's delivery is the poem's central drama, rather than the lynching itself. Harper's poems protest lynching by representing the scene of her protest.

On their brow the sun has left traces;
Shrink not from their sorrow in scorn.
When they entered the threshold of being
The children of a King were born. (19-24)

Harper understates racial phenotype as "traces" of the sun to indicate how incompatible racist scorn for dark skin is with a Christian worldview. As an appeal to religious sensibility, this understatement suggests that Harper is saying women ought to oppose lynching out of sympathy, but sympathy for the women who suffer, the mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of victims, and not only for its largely male victims. Yet the reality of these suffering women is only part of Harper's lesson.

The combination of this identification and understatement of "traces" generates the poem's ultimate conceit and lesson. Harper claims that white women in the rest of the country should protest lynching in the South out of self-interest in their family's spiritual well being:

Oh, people sin-laden and guilty,
so lusty and proud in your prime,
The sharp sickles of God's retribution
Will gather your harvest of crime.

Weep not, oh my well-sheltered sisters,
Weep not for the Negro alone,
But weep for your sons who must gather

The crops which their father has sown. (41-48)

Harper protests the apathy of white women toward the terror of lynching by invoking the certainty of divine justice. Her protest in "Appeal to My Country Women" says the suffering of black women is on a course to become that of white women: "Sorrow follows the footsteps of crime, / And Sin is the consort of Woe" (55-56). In allowing the "crime" and "Sin" of lynching to proceed unabated, Harper suggests that white women have invited "Sorrow" and "Woe" into their familial experience. The sufferings of black women prove that misery is the correlate of lynching, and white women should not see themselves as immune. For Harper, the protest of lynching is identical with maintaining moral integrity among white families as well.

Harper represents lynching in "The Martyr of Alabama" more directly and dramatically than in her poem "An Appeal to my Country Women," but with equal appeal to divine justice. This poem is written in response to the killing of Tim Thompson, described in the poem's journalistic epigraph as "a little negro boy," who was "asked to dance for the amusement of some white toughs" (Harper 147). The epigraph goes on with the rest of the tragic story: "He refused saying he was a church member. One of the men knocked him down with a club and then danced upon his prostrate form. He then shot the boy in the hip. The boy is dead; his murderer is still at large" (Harper 147). Harper protests Thompson's death as not only unlawful but unholy, a desecration of a sacred day, proof of the irreverent horror of America's lynching epidemic and of the certainty of divine justice without an act of national redemption. In the poem, the event has a striking interpolation at the moment of killing:

Then recklessly a man(?) arose,
And dealt a fearful blow.
He crushed the portals of that life,
And laid the brave child low.

And trampled on his prostrate form,
As on a broken toy;
Then danced with careless, brutal feet,
Upon the murdered boy! (45-52)

These two central quatrains frame the lynching with killer and victim, moving from the "recklessly" (45) clubbing man to the "murdered boy" (52). Harper, however, unsettles her carefully wrought frame by inserting the question mark of line 45. This sudden interrogative term has a double force: it calls into question both the manhood and the humanity of the lyncher. She implies both a question: "What sort of man would do this to a God-fearing and defenseless boy?" and a riposte: "Clearly this sort of man is more brute than (hu)man." Lynching has become a dehumanizing force, but for the perpetrator not the victim.

When the poet addresses her audience—the listeners of her protest "oratory"[9]—she underscores the instrumentalism of this depiction of the lynching. Her first lynch poem "Appeal to Her Country Women" protests through gender, national and religious identifications, and "The Martyr of Alabama" no less insistently protests through similar social identities, most especially through her audience's religious self-definition:

[9] Patricia Liggins Hill has argued that in Harper's lifetime the basis for her fame was her dramatic delivery, her manner of "mov[ing] large masses of people throughout the country towards her social/political sentiments" (60).

Christians! behold that martyred child!
His blood cries from the ground;
Before the sleepless eye of God,
He shows what gaping wound.

Oh! Church of Christ arise! arise!
Let crimson stain thy hand,
When god shall inquisition make
for blood shed in the land. (53-60)

These lines complete the poem's equation of Thompson with the baby Christ, first invoked to identify the attack as on Christmas day, "the fairest pearl of time" (28). Any ambiguity as to the Christological point of the day is resolved in calling upon white Christians to be shamed for allowing the attack to occur then: "Let horror blanch each brow, / Pale every cheek with fears" (65-66). Thompson becomes a literal Christian martyr, and the poem concludes invoking the Christian apprehensiveness at the thought of God's Judgment Day.

The apocalyptic visions of divine retribution with which each poem closes may be Harper's surest bequest to later generations of poets within the protest tradition. Both Countee Cullen and Robert Hayden will associate lynching with apocalypticism, and Cullen in particular extensively uses Christian symbolism in his poems to signify lynching. Both poets and many others draw on versions of Harper's admonition of impending, negative judgment for the United States if it continues to hold so little regard for the life and well being of its black population:

Avert the doom that crime must bring
Upon a guilty land;
Strong in the strength that God supplies,
for truth and justice stand.

For Christless men, with reckless hands,
Are sowing around thy path
The tempests wild that yet shall break
In whirlwinds of God's wrath. (77-84)

For Harper, these "whirlwinds of God's wrath," allusions to the biblical story of Job, spin out divine vengeance for America, while for the same country, her poems inaugurate a mode of U.S. lyric.

Lynch Protests of New Jewish Poets

By the modernist era of twentieth-century poetry, the protest tradition of lynching poetry had developed a robustly practiced didactic mode. DuPlessis has explored the formal resonance between the cultural moments of the New Jew and the New Negro in the U.S. modern period: "The socio-cultural struggles within the Jewish community comprised Jewish modernity in the same way that debates about African-Americans and the representation of blacks were, in sum, the New Black" (DuPlessis 141). Each was part of race theorist Lothrop Stoddard's rising tide of color, a tide both dark and Semitic that threatened to mongrelize white America into permanent obsolescence. Jews, like blacks, were defined in U.S. society in opposition to white identity and cultural heritage,

and so lynching became a site of response to Norman Finkelstein's question[10] of "What happens to Jewishness—which is to say, what constitutes an expression of Jewish identity—when placed in the context of American poetry?" (2).

Modernist Jewish poets inhabited a cultural milieu separate from both white and black American culture, and asserted their identity in contradistinction to America's black-white racial division. In doing so, they invoked white on black racist violence in part because it resonated with forms of violence visited upon Jews in America and Europe. Louis Zukofsky self-consciously asserted his role as New Jewish poet and, as a late instance of modernist protest, invoked the terrible history of contemporary racism—acknowledging it, appropriating its terms, and lampooning the racist self-regard behind the global scale of white cultural destructiveness. In a passage from "A-13," Zukofsky underscores his unique cultural position relative to the U.S. racial situation by distinguishing himself from both a consuming white beast and exploited/consumed blacks and Africans:

> That that world was bitter
>
> Was world—
>
> The grace of a madhouse—courtesy, *Thanks*
>
> *for passover delicacies*
>
> *specially the black bambino*

[10] In the same work Finkelstein gestures toward an instance of early Jewish contradistinction from blacks, the Introspectivists, who used "literary reputation [as] a metonym for their reception as Jews within American civil society" (37). This "civil" society was white, and presumably the expression of racist disdain assisted the reception of European Jews among U.S. whites.

(bambini plural) Aint tasted

That kind of ADmired chocolate

for 40 years—

Candy nigger babies and the beast Apartheider

Hind-dependence on gold dust Africa

On slaviest business, free root's old pest

Not Nick in Ike nor Ike in Niké

Could Rhyme *love dove*— ("A-13")

In this brief passage from Zukofsky's long and complex poem, A, the first italicized passage is a quotation from a note by Ezra Pound (http://www.ofscollege.edu.sg/z-site/notes-to-a/A-13.php) that contains the barb "ADmired" directed at Zukofsky's Jewishness, the first two letters capitalized to signify the calendar's "AD," or Anno Domini. The barb is not lost on Zukofsky who picks up on Pound's pun and rewrites Pound's eating chocolates as an allegorical parody of the callous destruction of blacks by whites across the centuries, from slavery ("the slaviest business") through the Cold War ("Nick in Ike nor Ike in Niké" is a complicated reference to Nikita Kruschtev and Dwight Eisenhower [http://www.ofscollege.edu.sg/z-site/notes-to-a/A-13.php]). This passage has all the trappings of didacticism as Zukofsky protests Pound's anti-Semiticism with the history of white racist exploitation of blacks in the West: the beast Apartheider demeaningly sits on Africa and eats its generations, an image of three strata: infanticide, gluttony, and greed.

By the time Zukofky writes this passage in A, begun in 1928, U.S. Jewish poets have counterpointed the distinctiveness of Jewish identity with confrontations of African American subjects, critiquing the violence of white racist oppression. Within didactic traditions of lynch poetry this confrontation of oppression establishes the distinct alterity of the speaker's Jewish identity through not only the figure of the lynched body, but also parallel images of interracial encounter among black poets in the protest tradition. These critiques of oppression in Jewish poetry are polemically similar to Harper's work. For instance, Yehoash, a poet of some significance to Zukofsky, protested lynching in a Yiddish poem of 1919. In addressing white Americans Yehoash distinguishes himself from them in prayers and accusations, but he also distinguishes himself from blacks, invoking his own alterity as a Jewish witness of lynching:

> *Defiler*!
> Look at your work—
> A black body striped bloody,
> Eyes rolled back white in the black face,
> And gleaming teeth trying to eat
> The swollen red tongue. (3-8)

In this poem Yehoash confronts a white interlocutor with the "black body striped bloody" of a lynch victim, evidence of the extent to which white racial depravity sullies the biblical notion of the divine image of human nature: "Father of my soul, / Where shall I find You?" (1-2). The poet repeats this same prayer, interpolating "And Lord of all bodies" (10) to underscore the shared divine nature betrayed by white lynchers and to

highlight didactically his cultural position as an interloper upon the historical relationship between white and black Americans.

> *Profanity*!
>
> He who shudders
>
> In the blue webs
>
> Of your holy twilight,
>
> He who sways in your lament at night
>
> And your song by day,
>
> He who trembles in the corners
>
> Of your unborn desires,
>
> He who calls you, craves, tears at you—
>
> Has become black meat
>
> With thick lips and strange hair. (12-22)

This passage points out not just the literal sufferings of the black victim of lynching, but also the role this lynching plays in the formation of white identity by implying the centrality of the tortured black to "your lament," "your song," "your unborn desires." Thus white identity that would totally subjugate blacks to its emotional and erotic whims in the final word lynches the black, making the black body into "black meat/ With thick lips and strange hair." These final details suggest an alterity between blacks and the speaker of the poem as well, and the very same sort of alterity defines Jewishness as other than blackness and whiteness, preventing readers from taking the poem as written in a surrogate voice for the black victim.

In the late 1930s two striking Jewish protests were written, Berish Vaynshteyn's "Lynching" (1936) and Abe Meeropol's "Strange Fruit" (1939). The second of these lyrics went on to become an American song classic and deeply influential within black American culture, yet its meaning prior to Billie Holiday's extraordinary appropriation suggests that the poem strikingly resides within this early twentieth-century Jewish protest lyric tradition. Vaynshteyn's lyric revises the didacticism of the protest lyric as derived from Harper. Rather than addressing a white audience on lynching, Vaynshteyn protests to the victim:

> White wild hands snare you with a stray rope,
> And a July tree crucifies your Negro neck,
> In its heavy ripeness, in its full bloom.
> In the thick of green leaves the branch is more pliant,
> It does not break with the weight of a noose.
> Your neck with marks of the hangman's fingers—blots in the sun.
> Leaves break out in dew and sway gently as ever
> And don't feel that they are shaken by the wind of a hanged man. (1-8)

Vaynshteyn's speaker counterpoints images of naturally resilient suppleness with the lynching, through a scene orchestrating a confrontation with the lynchers themselves as well. This confrontation takes place from a position dually removed; both the lynch victim and the lyncher are kept at a distance. Vaynshteyn, therefore, condemns the lynching, but also resists an urge to take on a surrogate voice—indeed he tacitly asserts his ethnic position.

We have seen religious identity called upon in appeal to sentiment and awareness. Vaynshteyn, however, protests religious identity as ineffective for rescue because the Crucifixion was a suicide:

> Your singing prayer wept so mournfully to God,
>
> But he won't appear to you, his legs burst, his nailed hands,
>
> He cannot even open an eye with a tear for you
>
> Or accept your last word as a confession—He's crucified Himself. (13-16)

These lines further distinguish the speaker from the lynch victim, invoking Jewish cultural identity. This identity is the root of the speaker's distance from the lynchers—"White hands snare you" implies detachment—these are not the speaker's hands. This poem's equation of lynching to pogroms against European Jews makes clear why:

> Negro, the fate of destruction fell not only on you.
>
> Many die like you. Such a death is now in fashion,
>
> like this they now die everywhere— — —
>
> In Wedding, in Leopoldstadt and in Carolina. (20-24)

The distance from the lynchers, then, is sympathetic. The line—"like this they now die everywhere"—though written in the third person, in effect expresses a sentiment in the first person: "like this we now die everywhere." The poem's prolonged confrontation with the lynch victim, then, ultimately verges on the eidetic in final identification.

Meeropol's protest lyric directly confronts the pretensions and contradictions of Southern white identity. The speaker confronts the agrarian brutality of the white South from a perspective to which this identity is an unsettling mystery. Lynching intrudes on the poem's Southern landscapes as an integral, if incongruous and "strange" element.

"Blood on the leaves and blood at the root" (2) is the literal blood of the victim of lynching, and also the concept of blood as character, the racist superstition that race inherently determines moral fiber. The georgic middle stanza cites these landscapes as explicit figures of white identity:

> Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
>
> The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
>
> Scent of magnolia clean and fresh,
>
> Then the sudden smell of burning flesh. (5-8)

The uncanny and unsettling strangeness of lynching intrudes upon a natural world with violence and incongruity. This motif of lynching's interposition onto the speaker's landscape is common. The incongruity of lynching with the speaker's perception of Southern honor and fauna establishes the bewilderment and protest of the alien scene: "Here is a strange and bitter crop" (12). In the voice of Billie Holiday, Nina Simone and other African American singers, this poem still translates into a crucial statement on the condemnation of white racial terrorism because it confronts the suppressed brutality of white identity without establishing alterity with black victims of lynching. Without speaking for blacks per se, the strangeness of the strange fruit depends on terror and profound sympathy for the "black bodies swinging in the southern breeze" (3). Meeropol's protest thus departs from and continues New Jewish protest writing in striking ways.

Socialist Protest Poems in Modernist Era

Harper's protest mode offers a direct template for the protest traditions. Poets turn to her example in developing protest poems utilizing sympathetic portraits of lynching's pitiable survivors as well as refining further her calls for national redemption. These poets' protest emerged during the moment when "in the United States a discourse about the relationship between racial oppression and capitalist exploitation [drew] on a common fund of left-wing premises" (Foley 68). I will later take issue with the reading of Jean Toomer that grows out of Barbara Foley's Marxist Historicist approach, but I concede she has impeccably framed the moment in the protest tradition when "[the] postwar New Negro was, in the eyes of many, an anticapitalist radical who envisioned African-American emancipation as inseparable from—if not identical with—the project of a class-conscious, multiracial alliance" (69).

One of the journals upon which Foley focuses in her social study of the New Negro is the Liberator. Foley notes that the Liberator "published trenchant commentaries on lynching and racial violence" (40) out of a laudable "antiracist commitment" (41). A regular contributor to the Liberator, the Jamaican poet Claude McKay remarkably updates Harper's didactic caveats of divine retribution in the April 1919 issue with his poem "The Dominant White." This gripping lyric stages the violence of racist oppression as a perverse betrayal of a divinely ordained human fellowship. Lynching is one crime among many as further evidence of divinely ordered damnation and humiliation to visit the white race. Remarkably, McKay places white colonial expansion at the heart of this divine order—"He gave you law and order, strength of will / The lesser peoples of the world to lead" (5-6)—though the bitter irony of this central position means the expansion

is part of the betrayal. McKay's speaker contextualizes white supremacy as a betrayal of humanity and, indeed, of God:

> You have betrayed the black, maligned the yellow;
>
> But what else could we hope of you who set
>
> The hand even of your own against his fellow;
>
> To stem the dire tide that threatens yet?
>
> You called upon the name of your false god
>
> To lash our wounded flesh with knotted cords
>
> And trample us into the blood-stained sod,
>
> And justified your deeds with specious words;
>
> Oh! You have proved unworthy of your trust,
>
> And God shall humble you down to dust. (11-20)

McKay extends Harper by focusing on the transcendental ground of the betrayal of the human race by whites. McKay also contrasts with Harper. In particular, Harper frames her poems as a protest of lynching addressing the apathy of her predominantly white audiences whose deep religious convictions are authentic and saving—they may yet be stirred by the proper admonition into redeeming action. "The Dominant White" does not call upon relatively conscious and concerned whites to atone for the horror inflicted upon black Americans in redeeming action. Instead, McKay didactically condemns his white audience as beyond hope of redemption—they are too far gone, and can hope for divine restraint but not mercy. McKay's "you" assures hopelessness to the addressee, a hopelessness embodied in the severity and irremediable distortion of the divine plan in the historical actions of whites.

Jennette D. Pearl and Daytie Randle are two lesser known contributors to the Liberator whose work has not been discussed in print. Their respective poems, "Negro Bodies" in 1922 and "Lament" in 1923, are examples of the new variant on Harper's protest that emerges around this time. In Pearl's poem the loathing of trees that so suddenly overtakes the speaker protests the trauma of lynching by eliciting pity from the speaker of the poem that transfers into anti-lynching awareness and action. Later we will discuss how the protest of Angelina Weld Grimké's diptych of poems unsettles this very same process with eidetic figures, but as written by Pearl this poem has a familiar form—the speaker confronts a tree and as a consequence must confront the terror of lynching:

> I love the tree
> I love the soothing of its green and the fragrance of its sweetness
> I love the swaying of its branches, the rustle of it leaves.
> I love the sun spots and shadow it casts upon the ground.
> I love the hidden power of its roots and the grandeur of its imposing
> height. (1-5)

This part of the poem is a gentle affirmation of the tree as icon of natural authority and whimsical delectation. Pearl intentionally cancels the immediate imagery of lynching in her title by idealizing the landscape in the poem, then deliberately collapsing this imagery to assert the poet's trauma:

> And now, I turn from that tree in fear,
> Lest the body of my love swing from that height.
> The same as other Negro bodies of his kin,
> The wild sport of frenzied mobs, nurtured in secret strength. (6-9)

Perceiving the tree releases the possibility of perceiving lynching. The specific sympathies elicited by the poem, however, are not ultimately for the speaker's "love," whose lynching yet remains only possible. Rather, these sympathies are for the "other Negro bodies of his kin," whose death has been the result of casual brutality "nurtured in secret strength" by the Ku Klux Klan.

Harper calls upon religious and gender identities to ground her protest at the expanding terror of lynching, while Randle's speaker in "Lament" embodies these same identities. Hardworking and religious, with a life centered on family, the speaker of Randle's "Lament" is the very woman for whom Harper served as an advocate twenty-nine years prior. While this updating of Harper's "Appeal" does not explicitly call upon a certain class of white women to empathize with the speaker's plight, there can be no doubt this poem is phrased didactically along the same lines as Pearl's lyric. Both poets indict lynching as an intrusion on quotidian perceptions and, consequently, as a terrorizing of daily life. Randle's speaker declares, "I am a Negro Woman" (1), and represents the terror of lynching and white violence on a black family through the travails of the suffering matron. In doing so, Randle protests this suffering by evoking sympathetic response from the poem's readers, through the speaker's wish to die and the nihilism bred of despair: "my heart has become a sorrow-blasted wound, with stumps of raw, bleeding nerves" (6). The gruesome figures of lynching implied in Randle's imagery are moving and add power to the speaker's description of her son's lynching and certainty of her daughter's rape, two events carrying all the protesting force of Harper's "Appeal." In particular, Randle evokes Harper in illustrating an otherwise sympathetic family life of religious devotion:

> My mate is as strong as the oxen in the fields and as tender.
>
> I have known the sorrows of Mary, Mother of Christ. One bitter, black night my son, my first born, was torn from my arms by a band of ghostly, hooded riders and burned alive at the stake.
>
> The soft summer air is sweet with pink honeysuckle, but its fresh perfume brings no joy to me. My nostrils are filled with the unforgettable stench of burning human flesh.
>
> I look up from my wash tub and watch the cloud-curdled sky. But I see no beauty there, for I have also watched the blue spirals of smoke curling upward from the charred body of my son.
>
> My daughter is coarse and ignorant because of lack of school advantages. But she is a comely Negro girl, therefore the lawful prey of all men. And I grow cold with dread when I look into her eyes, for their deep prisoned secrets. (1-5)

The terrorizing trauma of this life is made especially poignant by the daughter's eyes and the naturalization of lynching onto the speaker's worldview. Appreciation of trees, skies, and the smell of flowers all collapse into the terror of lynching; the trauma of this destruction replaces the gesture of address that embeds the antecedent scenario of the poem in the poem itself, and as a consequence each poem didactically marries resistance to lynching with a return of these women to enjoying the natural world, a resistance that indicates a broader liberation of other women from such victimization. In each poem, this enjoyment, this promise of romanticism cancelled with lynching's taint is identical to

a stable family life, to normal erotic attachment, to terror's reprieve, and most significantly to the breaking of the Klan's terrible, fraternal circle.

2: Landscape and Sexuality in Lynching Protest

Landscape as Protest

Adapted from Harper's model, protest poems of sympathy didactically protest lynching using landscapes as a site of traumatic experience. These poems urge political action through the reader's care for the person upon whom the trauma of lynching is unjustly inflicted. Within the protest tradition such landscapes came to have an eidetic function as well, most richly illustrated by the example of Jean Toomer's Cane. Landscapes were also used to protest lynching through irony, as affective figures that reconfigure traumatic sites affirmatively, tacitly acknowledging trauma while depicting its overcoming. Fenton Johnson's landscape in "When I Die" affectively invokes the speaker's poetic vocation to cancel eidetically the prescribed roles of the color line, and to project the black male body out of its "place," out of the grip of disciplining racist violence. Johnson uses landscape imagery to accomplish this projection, imagining new conditions for U.S. black subjectivity in the lynch era, the darkest night of America's soul: "When I die my song shall be / Crooning of the summer breeze" (1-2). The poet's images allude negatively to equally terrifying extremes of the experience of the lynched black body: the body (unknown, invisible, lost) of the victim dangling in woods and the body on display, marking what further terrors may come when a black steps out of place.

Although at the margins of Johnson's "When I Die," the figures of lynching sharpen the poem's meaning by exchanging the brutal verticality of the lynched body with horizontal recline. This poet's black male body is almost purely eidetic, being an object of commemoration. This body has not suffered the indignities of castration or

public mutilation and torture, and the poet affectively sustains a relationship to the very natural world from which the speakers in Pearl and Randle poems felt they must turn:

> On a couch as green as moss
>
> And a bed as soft as down,
>
> I shall sleep and dream my dream
>
> Of a poet's laurel crown. (5-8)

Johnson's protest is no less a protest for its ironizing idealizations. The earth welcomes the poet. The poet's rest is serene, and he experiences what dreams may come from the Apollonian mark of poetic distinction, the laurel crown, a substitute for the noose that harkens to the Homeric origins of the eidetic function. Johnson modernizes these Homeric origins, complementing the first stanza's daytime (associated with Apollo, Greek god of the sun) with the second stanza's nighttime (evoking Diana, Apollo's sister and goddess of the moon), an alternate scene of the natural world that acknowledges the resonance of the poet's song. This imagery of the moon—a procession of "moonbeams thousand strong" (15) that "[p]ast my grave each night shall file" (16)—is intentionally a further foil to the laurel crown and also invested in the Greek cultural origins of the very term "eidos."[11]

Grimké turned to the subject of lynching in several genres, and uses landscapes with an overt sense they are freighted with the possibility of traumatic experience; she also uses both daytime and nighttime imagery. In her poem "Trees," for instance, she sees trees as by nature redeemingly divine, with leaves like "soft and little tongues [that]

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[11] Allen Grossman's turn to Homer's representation of Apollo suggests his "eidos" derives from the philosophical rather than rhetorical tradition, Socrates rather than Isocrates. Specifically, the force of the eidetic in poetry derives from Plato's ειδοσ ("form"), an epistemic, aesthetic, and ethical principle structuring reality. See Mitchell H. Miller, Jr. for a discussion of Plato's didactic or, as Miller says, psychagogic use of literary structures to engage eidetic nature.

speak/ Of Him to us" (6-7). As we saw in Frances Harper's work, however, "man's hate" (12) spoils this beauty, leaving a "black-hued gruesome something" (10) of the lynch victim "amid the wistful sounds of leaves" (9). The traumatic presence of lynching is imagined as a corrupt imposition onto divine arboreal natural. Her diptych of poems, "Tenebris" and "The Black Finger" goes further, relying on affective images resonant with lynch poems protesting through sympathy, and following the didactic model of Dunbar's "The Haunted Oak." Dunbar's poem is the archetypal protest through the experience of the natural world. The tree of the title tells the story of its bough, the desiccation of which is the mark of the lynched body. Palpable terror emanates from the trace of lynching: "And why, when I go through the shade you throw, / Runs a shudder over me?" (3-4). The poet's "shudder" has a transumptive edge in Dunbar's poem, altering the tree's shadow into a permanent sign of the lynched body.

Although Grimké's speaker passes a cypress not an oak, her brief, imagistic[12] lyric "The Black Finger" has much in common with Dunbar's narrative monologue. Each poem begins similarly: the speaker passes an inexplicably poignant tree, and disbelief is suspended as the poet addresses it. Grimké's poem focuses on a landscape dominated by a singular tree, allusively wrought as a version of the lynching tree:

> A straight cypress,
>
> Sensitive
>
> Exquisite,
>
> A black finger

[12] In Color, Sex, and Poetry, Gloria Hull has argued that Grimké "violates the suggestive objectivity that is part of [the imagist creed]" (143). But she seems to have only Ezra Pound's imagism in mind rather than, say, H.D.'s, whose early works (such as "Pool" and "Sea Violet") similarly blend objectivity and interrogation.

Pointing upwards.

Why beautiful, still finger are you black?

And why are you pointing upwards? (4-10)

Grimké's terse eloquence is beguiling, and so the affective force of her first question may not fully emerge. For the poet, the tree's blackness reifies movingly affective qualities of the tree rather than allowing the tree to stand as a sign of the annihilation of blackness. Also the tree's upward gesture is forceful because the tree cancels lynching figures, which would draw the height of the tree downward with dangling figures. The tree as a raised upward finger signals authority, an authority (Grimké's own) able to use aesthetic experience in resistance to the historical oppression of the color line, by urging blackness again out of place with regard to history's oppression—what is typically a moment affirming a historical nightmare of subjugation and captivity suddenly outstrips oppression's capacity to signify the meaning of blackness. This tree as an exquisite black finger begins signifying a beautiful black body without forgetting the trauma of the violence visited upon black bodies.

The resistance to oppression in "The Black Finger" deconstructs the lynching tree's power to signify violence. Yet Grimké's affective defiance of the color line is not imaginatively complete in "The Black Finger." Grimké returned to this landscape two years later with the poem "Tenebris," a depiction of a landscape symbolically organized around the color line. The poem's title means "in darkness" or "in dark places," and this darkness is the insistent recrudescence of historical oppression, resistance to the color line meeting this line's intransigence:

There is a tree, by day,

That, at night,

Has a shadow,

A hand huge and black,

With fingers long and black. (1-5)

We may imagine this tree as an affective doppelganger of the tree in "The Black Finger" a shadow-tree as the hand of history raised in defiance of lynching. Where before covert, the lynching symbolism is explicit in "Tenebris":

All through the dark,

Against the white man's house,

In the little wind,

The black hand plucks and plucks

At the bricks.

The bricks are the color of blood and very small. (6-11)

Grimké's imagery here depicts action along a visible color line marked in blood. Literally the image is of a tree quivering in the wind against the lonely backdrop of "the white man's house," yet the menace of lynching transumes this scene into a nightscape that also allegorizes the suffering of a lynched body, metonymically present as a hand "plucking" at the limits of race and racial violence.

"Is it a black hand, / Or is it a shadow?" (12-13). Pragmatically, this terminal question interrogates the greater reality for the poem. Is the shade tree the grounded zombie-like grope of a lynch victim seeking acknowledgement and escape from the plight of lynching? Or is it not the shadow of a haunting black spirit, but the eidetic

shadow that lies upon the white social imagination to effect limits to supremacist vigilance and racist vigilantism?

Grimké's landscapes are intriguing because the lyrical voice of especially the second scene is neither inward, nor directed to a fixed addressee. The last couplet of "Tenebris" raises the powerful question of audience, a question already settled in both "The Haunted Oak" and "The Black Finger." To whom is this final question addressed? "Tenebris" manages to invoke eidetic and didactic elements variously without blending them. The final impersonality of the poem suggests the poet's interlocutor is not the lynching tree itself, but a companion who also perceives the poet's landscape. Perhaps the companion is us. The question's phrasing at any rate seems intended as much to gauge the companion's perceptions as to settle the poet's own.

Cane and Eidos

In Cane Jean Toomer explores Southern landscapes as a lynching site, populated by didactically poignant accounts of life against the grain of the color line. These accounts, in turn, are filled with affective figures, day and nightscapes of sexual attraction that function eidetically. Cane's modernist lynching figures are liminal to both black and white experience, and these eidetic qualities emerge in conjunction with didactic ones, innovating the protest traditions to which the book belongs. Cane protests the normative social force of the color line by depicting the very margins of racial and sexual interaction lynching would destroy. Although Toomer's identification with the rural black community of Sparta, Georgia, is usually read as Cane's subject, the book's structure emphasizes a subtle, especially erotic protest of the color line. In Cane as in

life, the color line is a mechanism for keeping blacks physically, psychically, and emotionally in attitudes of submissiveness and subservience, which is to say "in their place." Cane's landscapes alternate between fecundity and barrenness, each resonant with sexual risk and the traumatic impressions of racial experience under the oppression of the color line.

Cane explores the limits of the color line in circumscribing experience even in the Jim Crow South. "Kabnis," the most overt dramatization of Toomer's experiences, unfolds along the title character's ambivalent sense of communal belonging: Kabnis is an outcast, living in fear of violating regional mores and sharing the fates of the South's many other black victims of lynching. In Cane, Kabnis is not unique in his ambivalence or in the figures of lynching associated with him. Modernist lynching figures shape meaning throughout the first section and place the community-defining pressures of the color line under pressure. Lynching that would annihilate erotic passion across the color line in Cane only reinforces the reality of such passion. Toomer affectively represents cross-racial sexual attraction as an eidetic human erotic response that always walks the line of lynching violence.

The narrator of the prose sketch "Fern," biographically similar to Toomer as well, shares Kabnis's ambivalence, and comments at one point on his place in the community: "I was from the North and suspected of being prejudiced and stuck-up" (17). In this case the narrator's spiritual solidarity is at odds with his social ostracism in the community: "When one is on the soil of his ancestors, most anything can come to one" (19). This ambivalence is more than Toomer's self-characterization because a large a number of characters in Cane's first section have a problematic relationship to the racial

communities of Sempter: Barlo, Laurie, Carma, Bob Stone, and numerous others. Cane's depictions of the South dramatize lives dominated by personal ambivalence toward racial communities: the color line is acknowledged, even explored, but not consistently observed. The lives of these citizens are affectively represented on the verge of exile and beyond in black and white communities—the shadow of lynching always threatens to descend and alter the conditions of meaning in these lives.

The eidetic function of Cane appears in implied or stated sexual congress across lines of color, a dramatic ambivalence toward the limits of a racially defined community. Interracial sexual attraction and lynching have a well established history; Dora Apel points out in her recent work Imagery of Lynching that "[a]ntimiscegenation laws supported lynch law in seeking to maintain white social domination through the prevention of intermixing [and] spectacle lynchings served as warnings to the entire black community to 'stay in its place'"(Apel 44); a rich continuous tradition of writings on the stories behind the story of lynching bolsters the claim. Wells-Barnett, for instance, early on in lynching's history pointed out that relationships transgressing the color line were widespread and often consensual even in the furiously evangelical climate of early twentieth-century racism in the South: "There are many white women in the South who would marry colored men if such an act would not place them at once beyond the pale of society and within the clutches of the law" (6). Cane intently explores "beyond the pale" of the society Wells-Barnett has in mind by affectively linking sexual themes to the violence of lynching. As a consequence, eroticized bodies and evacuated landscapes in the first section's lyrics comprise the work's representation of lynching and of the South.

Toomer's modernist lynching figures break the color line because the color line circumscribing Cane's semi-fictional community does not keep blacks in their place—if it ever had, the conformity reified by lynching would have been moot. The landscapes and bodies of Toomer's Cane represent the sites of emerging eidetic functions in figures of lynching for the protest tradition. In his use of this function, Toomer's Cane may be usefully counterpointed with lynching protest in the work of James Weldon Johnson, who aims not so much to contest the color line as to resist its subjugation of black men to positions of inferiority. Johnson invokes lynching didactically to advocate resistance to sexual attraction at the color line, a covert protest of the motives for lynching that also organizes Johnson's rearrangement of the affective function of identification from outside protest traditions.

Irrepressible History

"Georgia Dusk" harmonizes with the themes of the first section. Occurring at about the midpoint of the first section (eight pieces precede it, and seven pieces follow), "Georgia Dusk" is both a prolepsis of the lynching to come in "Blood Burning Moon" as well as a transumptive portrayal of that lynching, an allusion not pointing to historical conditions in Georgia but determining the sense and tone of the entire poem. The question of how the landscape of "Georgia Dusk" engages historical conditions for reading the poem have been the basis of recent interpretations that frame the issue of dramatic setting effectively if in a flawed manner. For instance, Barbara Foley's " 'In the Land of Cotton': Economics and Violence in Jean Toomer's Cane" explores Toomer's "[vital concern] with contemporaneous episodes of racial violence" (192) through Cane's

engagement with the material conditions of Sparta, Georgia. Foley, a Marxist historicist critic, singles out Kabnis—and, generally, Toomer's narrative prose—because she argues the "irrepressibility of history" (194). For Foley, history is repressed by "Toomer's mythifying imagination" (194), the limits of which are exemplified in the other sections of Cane, in "the short stories and lyrics, which compress social phenomena into intense imagistic patterns" (194).

Foley's point is well taken, though her explicitly political designs draw up expectations alien to Cane. Journalistically accurate depiction of social conditions is not the primary concern of any part of Cane because Cane is not journalism. Hence, what is at stake in the work is not accuracy. What is more, lack of concern with historical and material accuracy need not of necessity imply a compensating motive of mythopoeia in Cane. In the same essay, Foley points to her sense of Cane's limits, using "Georgia Dusk" and "Song of the Sun" as evidence:

> Toomer's lush lyricism is achieved only through a fetishization of labor processes. The mill whistle that summons men to and from their labor takes shape as a natural phenomenon; low wages, layoffs, and debt peonage are invisible. Even the devastation of the woods—with the concomitant threat to the livelihood of the very laborers who chop down the trees—is swallowed up in the dominant images of showering pine-needles and animate, music-making trees. (183)

Foley implies that history appears only allusively in writing, and more specifically solely via narrative allusion to material conditions, reinforcing that writing's significance to history as a purely passive and complicit receptacle of historical chronicling. Her only

suggestion to the contrary occurs in a footnoted acknowledgement of a somewhat cursory reading of "Georgia Dusk" in an essay by Carolyn Mitchell, whose sense that the poem contains figures of lynching matches my own.

Foley's reading of "Georgia Dusk," however limited, is preferable to the cultural historicist misreading David G. Nicholls presents in "Jean Toomer's Cane, Modernization, and the Spectral Folk." In that essay Nicholls understands the lynch-related phrase "night's barbecue" (4) literally as a nighttime dinner, or as "a feast of moon and men and barking hounds" (5) that indicates the reaped bounty of the land:

> The land would seem to provide an excess of food even as the mills were stripping it of its trees. The fecundity of the land here contributes to the sense in the poem that dusk is a time of leisure. The whistle has blown and work has stopped; it's time to sing and eat. (156)

Nicholls goes on to demonstrate in the essay that such a bounteous gathering would not have been likely in a region stricken with the boll-weevil and a weak economy (156-157), and concludes that "Toomer was misreading the scene before him" (157).

The tone of the last remark might be more appropriate to journalism than to literature. Because of his misplaced expectations, Nicholls overlooks the important interplay between fecundity and desiccation that ties sexual themes to landscape. For instance, the "[b]eauty so sudden" (14) of "November Cotton Flower" anticipates the quick flarings of sexual emotion in the prose sections: the eroticized figure of the precocious Karintha is seen "as innocently lovely as a November Cotton Flower," whose "sudden darting past you was a bit of vivid color" ("Karintha" 3); Bane has fit of rage and sexual jealousy during which he maims another man ("Carma"); Fern's erotically

charged eyes have an instant magnetism ("Face flowed into her eyes. Flowed in soft cream foam and plaintive ripples in such a way that wherever your glance may momentarily have rested, it immediately thereafter wavered in the direction of her eyes" ["Fern" 16]); and Esther's sexual obsession with "King" Barlo stems from the strange trance that strikes him one day as he "suddenly drops to his knees on a spot called the Spittoon" ("Esther" 22).

The interplay between between fecundity and barrenness remains in "Georgia Dusk," where the celebratory abundance is contrasted with the prolepsis of "Blood-Burning Moon." Though no lynching occurs in the depicted action of "Georgia Dusk," Tom Burwell's lynching to come metaleptically determines the poem, rendering its tone elegiac rather than reverent. The placement and structure of "Georgia Dusk," then, alters the reader's sense of the meaning of its landscape by anticipating Tom Burwell's fate. The seven quatrains of "Georgia Dusk" are in fact three paired stanzas and a coda. The two opening stanzas give the poem its title, and the elaborate syntax of the first conceals the startling directness of the poem's initial sentence: "The sky [/] Passively darkens for night's barbecue" (1-4). This directness can be usefully contrasted to the prose it anticipates: "Up from the skeleton stone walls, up from the rotting floor boards and the solid hand-hewn beams of oak of the pre-war cotton factory, dusk came. Up from the dusk the full moon came" ("Blood" 30). In Trouble in Mind, Leon Litwack notes how "The public burning of a Negro would soon be known as a 'Negro Barbecue,' reinforcing the perception of blacks as less than human" (287). It is not wholly certain that Toomer's barbecue ought to be equated with Litwack's barbecue even if we take the second stanza to describe a lynch carnival:

A feast of moon and men and barking hounds,
An orgy for some genius of the South
With blood-hot eyes and cane-lipped scented mouth,
Surprised in making folk-songs from soul sounds. (5-8)

These lines could convey the chaotic revelry, the drunkenness, and pell-mell carousing of the white mobs whose stares are yet preserved in what has been unearthed of lynching photography. Strong evidence of the subject matter appears in the second pair of stanzas.

If the first pair of quatrains conveys an ambivalent stance toward subject matter highlighted by naturalistic imagery, the next pair resonates most deeply with the structure of this section of the work. This resonance derives from modernist lynching figures, though superficially the action of the stanzas is innocuous:

The sawmill blows its whistle, buzz-saws stop,
And silence breaks the bud of knoll and hill,
Soft settling pollen where plowed lands fulfill
Their early promise of a bumper crop.

Smoke from the pyramidal sawdust pile
Curls up, blue ghosts of trees, tarrying low
Where only chips and stumps are left to show
The solid proof of former domicile. (9-16)

The workday ends and the landscape is suffused with quiet. The trees have been cut down mostly, but even this seemingly disarmed site of violence will be the setting of a lynching. These stanzas invoke (and reverse) what has gone before and that which is to

come in Cane. The second stanza harkens back to the opening scene of the birthing Karintha: "A child fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine needles in the forest" (Cane 4). That narrative voice then panoramically shifts the scene:

> A sawmill was nearby. Its pyramidal sawdust pile smouldered. It is a year before one completely burns. Meanwhile, the smoke curls up and hangs in odd wraiths about the trees, curls up, and spreads itself out over the valley. ("Karintha" 4)

This sawdust and its smoke reappear in "Georgia Dusk" as a glance back to "Karintha," but this backwards glance is paired with anticipation; this saw mill is next used as a setting for Tom Burwell's lynching. In "Blood-Burning Moon" white lynchers pause, caught between extravagance and practicality in realizing their murderous desires before the moment of decision: "Drag him to the factory. Wood and stakes already there" (36). Even as lumber the trees of "Georgia Dusk" are lynching trees.

The setting and placement of "Georgia Dusk" imply a kinship with the final short story of Cane's first section: we are supposed to see the workers—"the men, with vestiges of pomp, / Race memories of king and caravan" (17-18)—as figures for the personality type we at last meet with Tom Burwell, as representations of his earned and deserved sense of pride and self-worth. Burwell's candid willingness to return white aggression leads to his death, but is a stark, affective contrast to the attitudes of the other blacks of the town, whose security depends on a lack of confrontation and "dreams of Christ."

Crossing the Color Line

Cane's first section climaxes with Burwell's lynching: "Now Tom could be seen within the flames. Only his head, erect, lean, like a blackened stone. Stench of burning flesh soaked the air. Tom's eyes popped. His head settled downward. The mob yelled" ("Blood" 36). This gruesome if strangely dignified scene transumes meaning in Cane's first section indirectly as well, through the interracial sexual context and Burwell's departure from properly obsequious behavior. Several of the lyrics in the first section hinge on the dramatic event of this lynching to explicate significant depictions of Southern society and the role of sexuality in unsettling the prescriptions of the color line reinforced through lynching.

The book's first lyric, "Reapers," at first blush seems more closely related to the workers of "Cotton Song" than the lynch carnival of "Georgia Dusk," but the sudden, casual grinding of a field rat among mower blades invokes the abruptness of the lynching at the end of the first section of the work:

> Black horses drive a mower through the weeds
> And there, a field rat, startled, squealing bleeds,
> His belly close to ground. I see the blade,
> Blood-stained, continue cutting weeds and shade. (4-8)

The bloody, churning blade invokes the incantation of "Blood-Burning Moon," and so the first image of the poem—"Black reapers with the sound of steel on stones/ Are sharpening scythes" (1)—is a figure of death. Since their victim is a rat, the aspect of social conformity that drives lynching appears. The rat is vermin, and its death is part of

the "clearing" of the field, the making of a uniform and fertile plot of land. Furthermore, the figure of the rat underscores the dehumanizing motive of lynching, the spectacular humiliations of which reinforce the denial of any modicum of dignity to the victim. Dignity of this sort was also denied black women when the line enforced white superiority and supremacy in the form of perpetual sexual availability to white men.

The sexual context of Bob Stone's rape-fantasy of Louisa in "Blood-Burning Moon" dramatizes this dehumanization of black women: "He saw Louisa bent over that hearth. He went in as a master should and took her. Direct, honest, bold. None of this sneaking that he had to go through now. The contrast was repulsive to him" (33). What Bob takes as obnoxious "sneaking," Louisa sees as courting, and while Toomer suggests there is some genuine feeling for Louisa on Bob's part, these feelings are obscured by Bob's fetishistic race-obsession.

The fetishistic element that characterizes Stone means that Louisa's appeal derives from the skewed relationship of power enforcing his social position. As a consequence, Stone cannot even describe to himself this appeal except to invoke the mysterious eroticism of racist terms: "She was lovely—in her way. Nigger way. What way was that? Damned if he knew. Must know. He'd known her long enough to know" (33). This brute contemplation of Louisa's beauty is the final appearance in the first section of the motif of black women's beauty and tellingly imbues this contemplation with the sense of white supremacist access that emboldens the lynch mob at the section's end. This motif begins at the first line of the book descending from "Her skin is dusk on the eastern horizon" (1) to "She was lovely—in her way. Nigger way." Cane makes Karintha and Louisa both women with a strong sense of belonging to the black

community. Whereas Karintha's portrait centers on birth, the story of Louisa's tragedy draws on death, and this twain meets in the uncanny woman depicted in the brief lyric "Face," where sexual passions indirectly present a tragic and moving image of black women's inner strength and outer beauty.

The first nine lines of "Face" transume the grief of motherhood eidetically, and the implied lynching figures have a didactic purpose. "Face" portrays a woman in mourning, though it is impossible not to read as well an air of eroticism in the poem, an air charged with the lost innocence of the mourning young lover terrorized by the violence of lynching that surrounds the picture of an equally terrorized maternal lamentation. In the first section, this charged air justifies the form of the poem as a blason, describing the attributes of the beloved in a series of comparisons:

> Hair—
>
> silver-gray,
>
> like streams of stars,
>
> Brows—
>
> recurved canoes
>
> quivered by the ripples blown by pain,
>
> Her eyes—
>
> mist of tears
>
> condensing on the flesh below (1-9)

The grey hair gives the image maternal features and suggests the anxiety of lynching trauma through the quivers of pain on the brow, and the tears in the eyes. The hair speaks as well of the dignity and wisdom of age. Here is the grey-haired matron, her face

expressing combinations of pain, grief, disbelief, and perhaps despair. The meaning behind these difficult combinations is given clearest expression in the song of the winds in “Kabnis”:

> White-man’s land
>
> Niggers, sing.
>
> Burn, bear black children
>
> Till poor rivers bring
>
> Rest, and sweet glory
>
> In Camp Ground. (1-6)

The third line is the plight and suffering of black mothers under the regime of lynching. These mothers bear children who are “burn[ed]” with evangelical zeal to preserve the color line by lynching those blacks who will not conform to their prescribed social roles. This view of the terrorized black mother is behind the revision of Mary Turner’s lynching that Toomer offers in “Kabnis” under the pseudonym, Mame Lamkins:

> She was in the family-way Mame Lamkins was. They killed her in th street, an some white man seein th risin in her stomach as she lay there soppy 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. An then they all went away. (“Kabnis” 92)

Toomer changes the circumstances of Turner’s lynching—she was set aflame rather than stabbed, the child stomped rather than impaled (Dray 245)—but the lines spoken by the

wind suggest that integral to Cane is engagement with lynching to protest the callous devastation faced by black mothers in the age of lynching.

The second half of "Face" highlights the woman of the poem in a further role of mourning defined by womanhood, not only grieving mother, but also more. The somatic focus of these lines on the muscularity of her jaw-line and the darkness of her skin invokes the woman as a figure of the beloved: not only a mother but a wife, a lover. Here she represents the Black Madonna scrawled on the wall after Barlo's vision, as well as Louisa and Carma and Esther:

> And her channeled muscles
> are cluster grapes of sorrow
> purple in the evening sun
> nearly ripe for worms. (10-13)

The final image of rotting grapes is also an image of rotting flesh: her sorrow makes her into a version of the victim's tortured corpse. The transfer completes the image of familial identity, and suggests a powerful identification with the dead loved one. We know the spectacle of lynching was often prolonged, by displays of the lynched bodies or body parts, and so these final lines suggest a quadrilateral of mourning whose interstices are grief, the mother, the lover, and the lynched body.

Because their poems share the form of the blason, the grieving black woman of "Face" is counterpointed to the overtly eroticized image of a white woman in "Portrait in Georgia." Like "Face," "Portrait in Georgia" is an eidetic blason, in this instance an inventory of the beloved's body that grafts the speaker's attraction onto the lynching violence that threatens the lover's own body, but without dissuasion:

Hair—braided chestnut,

coiled like a lyncher's rope

Eyes—fagots

Lips—old scars, or the first red blisters,

Breath—the last sweet scent of cane. . . (1-5)

Attraction contains the threat of lynching but eidetically arranges this threat around the bodies of both the lover and the beloved. The figures of lynching, thus, infuse the risk of interracial sexual expression with a sense of a mortal threat issuing from the racist delirium against miscegenation driving many acts of lynching. The physical attractiveness of this woman suggests the brutality of the white community toward the suggestion of interracial sexual union between a black man and white woman: the beloved's hair becomes a noose, ubiquitous symbol of the lynch mob; in her eyes he sees fires in which he could burn; and inasmuch as her lips suggest kisses, they also suggest the vicious maiming and fresh wounds preceding death by lynching. Tellingly, not some other physical trait, but her sensual, yet unseen attribute of breath is without threat of violence, and the source furthermore of powerful attraction. Toomer would certainly have known the etymological transpositon from breath to psyche to soul, and this attraction is associated with the pleasure of cane.

This figure indicates pleasure drawn from cane's natural sweetness and suggests that the attraction of the speaker is of a different kind than the fetishism of Bob Stone, whose attraction is characterized by the indulgence of power and position on the color line. Bob Stone's interracial sexual experience leads through diminished power and vanishing prestige in the yet changing social orders of the emancipated South. Attraction

in “Portrait” is a counterpoise to lynching, and therefore places erotic longing beyond the scope of lynching’s violence. Though the trauma of lynching threatens the body of the lover, that violence cannot disarm the unbounded freedom of human attraction.

What is more, this penultimate equivalence of the beloved’s breath with cane echoes the climatic moment of “Fern.” There the narrator meets Fern in a canefield, initiating a romance across the color line that proves too much for Fern, who panics and swoons in a manner that calls to mind the processing of cane for the narrator: “She sprang up. Rushed some distance from me. Fell to her knees, and began swaying, swaying. Her body was tortured with something it could not let out. Like boiling sap it flooded arms and fingers till she shook them as if they burned her” (19). This shock is that of exiting the roles demanded by the color line. Along with the invocation of cane, the image of bodily fire repeats in “Portrait in Georgia”: “And her slim body, white as the ash / of black flesh after flame” (6-7). After the episode with Fern swooning in the field, the threat of lynching enters that story: “[T]here was talk of making me leave town. But they never did. They kept a watch out for me, though. Shortly after, I came back North” (19). The narrator departs the South surrounded by deepening suspicions he does not respect the color line in a town that had already offered a cold shoulder. In “Portrait in Georgia,” the lyric’s return to corporeal imagery is a lynching figure that conveys sexual desire, and also the uncannily sexual paranoia that underwrites lynching: namely, the racist and white supremacist fantasies that race over-determines sexual proclivities and control. There is a further assumption that interracial sexual arousal has a dangerous, perverse relationship to the status quo. White men’s access to black women reinforces the myth of black women’s indiscriminate willingness for sex, while it assures that the place of black

subservience is maintained in "proving" this willingness. The black male voice expressing attraction across the color line braves the physical threat of lynching as that voice challenges the pornographic narrow-mindedness of racist discourse that assumes rape is the only form of black male sexual expression. Toomer suggests that in interracial sexual attraction both lover and beloved are outside both black and white communities insofar as each is kept in place by the color line, and must cross it. What is more, these lovers are endangered by the zealous racism of the Southern white lynching mass, though their attraction signifies an eidetic function that makes an affective figure of the attraction itself.

Sex and Supremacy

Cane underscores the sexual component of the racist aggression behind lynching as Burwell's lynching transumes meaning in many of the lyrics in the book's first section. The most vivid portrayal of this component occurs with Stone's rape-fantasy in "Blood-burning Moon," but another occurs in "Esther" when a host of preternatural events take place after King Barlo finishes his trance-like account of the middle passage and slavery: "Years afterwards Esther was told that at that very moment a great, heavy, rumbling voice actually was heard. That hosts of angels and of demons paraded up and down the streets all night. That King Barlo rode out of town astride a pitch-black bull that had a golden ring in its nose. And that old Limp Underwood, who hated niggers, woke up next morning to find he held a black man in his arms" ("Esther" 23). Beyond the comic effectiveness of the last event, Limp Underwood's name and predicament suggest a

liminal relationship between racial hatred and an individual's repressed sexual attractions.

Underwood anticipates what Marlon Ross identifies in protest literature as "revealing moments in which racial violence collides with male-male sexuality" (318) as well as, among other things, a 1935 article in the Baltimore Afro-American which ends, declaring, "There is no further need of a psychic research or a psychoanalysis to prove that Southern lynchings are caused by sex-urge sublimation" (Ginzburg 226). Underwood's scene also anticipates the role of sexually explicit material in the work of contemporary artist Glenn Ligon, whose "Feast of Scraps" contrasts gay pornography with images from black family photo-albums in an effort "[to probe] silences around issues of gay sexuality" (http://www.diacenter.org/ligon/intro.html). Though Dora Apel misreads the sexuality of one of these images—an anonymous photo of interracial gay sex: a black man sexually penetrating a white man—Apel is right to suggest that the image "only begins to hint at the complexities and repressed anxieties that inform the histories of southern interracial liaisons, the mere specter of which led to thousands of summary killings in order to maintain the 'color line'" (Apel 220).

These complexities and anxieties are white supremacy's underlying (homo)sexual content. Marlon Ross has argued that this content directs white supremacy's drive to "literal lynching castration and symbolic race rape" (318) aimed toward the black community:

> Because race rape unintentionally calls attention to the male-male sexual relation buried deep within the heterosexual ideology of rape, it also exposes, again unintentionally, the reversible dynamic by which the

> social norm of aversion can flip into an impulse to attraction, by which the castrating risk of white male supremacy must provoke a fantasy of black men's penile supremacy and by which the focus on touching other men's sex organs, purportedly in order to dismember them, must turn into a panic over being attracted to male same-sexuality. (316)

Ross goes on to conclude, "so white men's repulsion for, and thus fascination with, black men's bodies, particularly the size and potency of their penises, serves as a hidden ground for U.S. practices of racial domination" (316). The U.S. primal scene of white supremacy in lynching is often morbidly focused on ritual castration because male sexual competition is a crucial arena for racist expression. Publicly confronting and mutilating black men's sexual organs would undo the numerous threats posed by black virility—social competition, miscegenation, violent sexuality—while affirming the intrepidity of white virility, which risks the conversion of repulsion to attraction.

The history of U.S. lynching corroborates Ross's observations. Ralph Ginzburg's anthology of American lynch journalism, 100 Years of Lynching, records this ingrained sexual component in lynching: black men were routinely castrated prior to lynching or afterward, and on those occasions when the black men could not be found numerous black women were raped and lynched in retaliation for real or imagined actions of male relatives. In a case from 1917 that combines all the chaotic racial-sexual dynamics and fabrications of lynching, the sister of Bert Smith of Houston, Texas, was gang-raped and beaten by a group of Smith's white co-workers after Smith complained of the cat-calls she and his mother received when they visited him at work (Ginzburg 113). One of these men later chided Smith about the event and Smith "dealt this white a vicious blow that

felled him" (Ginzburg 114). In retaliation, a group of other co-workers tortured and lynched Smith, even forcing "a 10 year-old white lad who carried water around the camp to take a large butcher knife and unsex him" before dragging Smith "down the main thoroughfare" (114). After these atrocities, the crowd fabricated an accusation of rape.

The involvement of sexual assault and mutilation with racist denigration is clear in the case of Bert Smith. Yet it bears noting the scene of same-sexuality embedded in white supremacy is, in practice, often enacted as a response to sexual congress—real or fabricated—between black men and white women, congress viewed as a scene of black predation. In "White Arrow" a poem composed after Cane, Toomer figures white masculine delusion as symptomatic of a profound existential self-deception on the subject of race: "Existing, yet you dream that breath depends / On bonds I once contracted for" (2-3).

Toomer's later poetry is invested in a language of racial mutability, experiential transience, and expressions of protean spiritual adaptability. This language characterizes Toomer's own increasingly mystical flight from race and its contingencies—in the poem's words, "bonds I once contracted for." In "White Arrow" of particular interest is Toomer's use of the word "breath," which in "Portrait in Georgia" signifies powerful sexual attraction that negates the fear-inducing sexual boundary of race. In "White Arrow," "breath" has presumably[13] less sexual weight but signifies an existence that moves beyond the verge of racial experience: "It is / a false belief induced by sleep and

[13] In her authoritative study Terrible Honesty, Ann Douglas claims that though "Toomer was heterosexual, married and a parent" (97), he yet "had strongly and sometimes painfully bi-gendered and bi-racial impulses and needs" (270).

fear" (3-4). Toomer's "[i]t" refers to racially defined experience, the "dream" and "false belief" to which white men are subject in their delusion of supremacy.

At the heart of the delusion "White Arrow" challenges is the conviction that race demarcates not only character and social standing but also "natural" (rather than conventional) domains of sexual belonging and claim; that is, black men and women belong together, though each can assert this sexual claim only so long as white men—whose claim extends to all women—allow it. According to U.S. racism, any white woman who would willingly desire to engage in an interracial liaison subjects herself to ravenously debased black male sexuality. Such women are suspect, perverse, without moral scruples, and victimized. In response to these social views, protest writing has established a tradition of mistrust of the motives of white women in interracial sexual congress. Wells-Barnett most famously calls them "white Delilahs" (25), alluding to the biblical story of Sampson and his betrayal by the woman he loved. Also, the threat of lynching in Toomer's "Portrait in Georgia" may be read as carrying a hint of suspicion; will the woman betray the speaker, force the dangerous relationship into becoming a lethal one? I will end this chapter with James Weldon Johnson's "White Witch" and "Brothers—An American Drama." Both poems predate Cane, and while the former predicts and counterpoints what I have argued as Toomer's complex critique of interracial sexuality, the latter anticipates a subsequent emphasis in modernist lynching protest poetry on figures I will explore in the next chapter as figures of what Victor Turner calls *communitas*, a preparatory break from the social norm among individuals who encounter new paradigms by which to enact social experience.

The very title of "White Witch" suggests the malevolence ascribed to white women in satanic cunning and infernal nature connoted by the term "witch." The voice of the poem speaks didactically, intending to address an audience of black men who may yet confront the risk of interracial attraction:

> O Brothers mine, take care! Take care!
> The great white witch rides out tonight;
> Trust not your prowess nor your strength,
> Your only safety lies in flight;
> For in her glance is a snare,
> And in her smile there is a blight. (1-6)

This coquettish witch is a seductress and a predator, preying on black men. The poem is written to allude specifically to lynching, most directly in that the "witch appears / in all the glowing charms of youth" (11-12). One of the least commented upon aspects of lynching is the appearance of the lynch victims, an appearance cultural theorist Eric Lott described as often "young, slim, athletic" (http://www.firstofthemonth.org/). The suggestion is not that lynching victims were chosen for their body type, but follows on my previous point: in many cases victims of lynching were sexual competition for, as much as racial threat to, the lynchers. The ready impetuousness of youth to defy social convention is a commonplace of literature and social thought, and the caveat of Johnson's "White Witch" is directed explicitly to young black men who may become enamored of equally impetuous young white women and, thus, share the fate of Charles Fisher (Ginzburg 90) or Young Reed (Ginzburg 95), the former of whom was physically

maimed and mutilated, while the latter was shot to death for daring to kiss across the color line.

Toward the poem's close, Johnson's speaker describes the primitivist compulsions driving this white witch to prey on black men. She is drawn by the attraction of primal urges signified by African-American heritage:

> Oh! She has seen your strong young limbs,
> And heard your laughter loud and gay,
> And in your voices she has caught
> The echo of a far-off day,
> When man was closer to the earth;
> And she has marked you for her prey.
>
> She feels the old Antaean strength
> In you, the great dynamic beat
> Of primal passions, and she sees
> In you the last besieged retreat
> Of love relentless, lusty, fierce,
> Love pain-ecstatic, cruel-sweet. (48-59)

Though this is a didactic poem of mistrust, a poem offering a picture of white women as a kind of marauder of black men, these lines invoke black men as the limit to the witch's power and the intimate focus of the vampiric desire that draws the witch on. In Johnson's poem these characteristics of the young black male eidetically trace a primordial relationship between black men and chthonic forces, figured through Greek

mythology. The figure of the black male is clearly primitivist here: black men's passions are "dynamic" and "primal"; for black men, love is "relentless, lusty, fierce" and "pain-ecstatic, cruel-sweet."

This somatic figure of the black male affectively doubles as the poet's own self-description, for these attributes are precisely the reason for the poet's liaison with the white witch. The poet confronts the threat of lynching in having his liaison:

> For I have seen the great white witch,
>
> And she has led me to her lair,
>
> And I have kissed her red, red lips
>
> And cruel face so white and fair;
>
> Around me she has twined her arms,
>
> And bound me with her yellow hair. (30-35)

The sexual encounter inspires a profound lassitude in the poet toward the threat of lynching: "And [I] did not care although I felt / The strength go ebbing from my soul" (40-41). This lassitude did not finally ensnare the speaker, for he lives to write the poem and warn others. The poet's warning has two impulses driving it: first to invoke the many thousands of victims lynched for the "crime" of "succumb[ing] to the smiles of white women" (Wells 6); secondly, to convey eidetic hope of survival to young black men who may yet be in the clutches of the white witch.

"Brothers"

Johnson's "White Witch" is a caveat on interracial liaisons and a didactic protest of the risk. Like Jean Toomer's "Portrait in Georgia,"[14] it involves an affective figure of a black body that risks lynching, and in this way protests the dangerous verge of the color line in sexual matters. But there are numerous contrasts to these poems as well. Toomer's voice is observational and detached; were the scene not one traditionally associated with love poetry and contextualized by Cane, one would be hard pressed to identify the emotional background against which the poet draws the poem's central image. To whom is the poem addressed? Possibly the beloved, possibly no one, possibly anyone who cares to read it. The speaker of "The White Witch," on the other hand, addresses his audience as clearly as the poems of Frances Harper: this is a man who has risked lynching, and warns young black men who might soon fall into the witch's trap as once the speaker did. In Johnson's poem the affective figure is united with didactic address by the word "brother," which carried especial import for Johnson on the topic of lynching.

In "Brothers—An American Drama," Johnson looks beyond the protest modes of the twenties and toward the thirties' focus on the attachments through which an individual's sense of the new possibilities of awareness and expression in social interaction gets renewed. The term "Brothers" is ironic, invoking the closeness of familial relation but also damning the poem's protagonists: the white leader of a lynch

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[14] See Cristina Stanciu "The Sinister Figure: James Weldon Johnson's 'The White Witch' (1922) and Jean Toomer's 'Portrait in Georgia' (1923)", Modern American Poetry. ed. Cary Nelson. 2000. Department of English, U of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. June 28, 2006 <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/johnson/witch.htm>

carnival and the black lynch victim. The poem is staged at the scene of a lynch carnival at which a white orator didactically drives the fury of the crowd to lynch by denying the humanity of the victim:

> Is he
>
> Not more like brute than man? Look in his eye!
>
> No light is there; none, save the glint that shines
>
> In the now glaring, and now shifting orbs
>
> Of some wild animal caught in the hunter's trap.
>
> How came this beast in human shape and form? (2-7)

This horrifying oration is a perversion of what we have seen in didactic protest, and based on the very worst supremacist strata of rationalist culture, that which would block blacks from claims to humanity without display of characteristics pleasing to paternalist ideology: "docile, child-like, tender-hearted" (10) and "faithful" (11). The orator goes so far as to ask the lynch victim, "How are you thus [a criminal]?" (9). Where the victim's race ought to have brought about characteristics of happy darky submissiveness, it has wrought the very opposite—and terrifyingly so. The lynch victim's response is an equally didactic monologue of resentment:

> Lessons in degradation, taught and learned
>
> The memories of cruel sights and deeds,
>
> The pent-up bitterness, the unspent hate
>
> Filtered through fifteen generations have
>
> Sprung up and found in me sporadic life.

On me the stain of conquered women, and

Consuming me the fearful fires of lust,

Lit long ago, by other hands than mine.

In me the down-crushed spirit, the hurled back prayers

Of wretches now long dead—their dire bequests—

In me the echo of the stifled cry

Of children for their battered mothers' breasts. (26-37)

In its display of human endurance, this monologue is affective and allows some sympathy to emerge for the victim, though the poem protests how the color line breaks such endurance. The monologue continues with the blank declaration: "I claim no race, no race claims me" (39). The strategy of this poem is unique among lynch poems in its constructing a representation of lynching to condemn the lynching by rendering the lynchers as versions of the lynch victim rather than by obtaining sympathy for the victim.

The lynch victim in this poem is guilty. His statement—"I am a thing not new, I am old / As human nature"—is a veiled allusion to the Biblical story of the first murderer, Cain, whose crime was perpetrated against his own brother. This tragic, fratricidal aspect of the biblical story forms an ironic contrast to Johnson's poem. In Genesis, the murder is rendered more horrible because of the familial relationship. In "Brothers," the very horror of the murder is the perverted source of kinship. As the lynch victim burns at the stake, the orator takes sadistic pleasure in looking:

See there!

He squirms! He groans! His eyes bulge wildly out,

Searching around in vain appeal for help!

Another shriek, the last! Watch how the flesh

Grows crisp and hangs till, turned to ash, it sifts

Down through the coils of chain that hold erect

The ghastly frame against the bark-scorched tree. (55-61)

Burned alive: the didactic dehumanization of lynching is literalized as the charred flesh of the victim, living flesh made inert matter. Yet the protest of the poem hinges on the victim's final words, italicized in the poem for emphasis: "*Brothers in spirit, brothers in deed are we*" (69). Johnson's point is to make the lynching figure an affective figure for an intuitive movement of awareness and possible action on the part of the whites. This final realization is one of lynching as a source of *communitas*. A later protest writer, Kenneth Patchen will express this same realization of *communitas* behind the lynch figures in his poem "A Nice Day for a Lynching": "I know that / One part of me is being strangled / While another part horribly laughs" (9-11).

3: Indirection and *Communitas* as Protest

Communitas and the Blue Man

After the path-making explorations of landscape and sexuality in protest writing of the twenties, throughout the thirties modernist lynching figures protest through affective invocations of what Robert Stepto calls *communitas*, a term he borrows from the work of anthropologist Victor Turner. For Turner, *communitas* is "social anti-structure" (45), though he is careful not to oppose this anti-structure to structure so much as to establish a dynamic temporal, i.e. "processual," interaction between the two. *Communitas* is "the development of new cultural ideals and attempts at their realization and at various modes of social behavior that [do] not proceed from the structural properties of organized social groups" (46); it is, in other words, an intuitive, shared break with social and ideological structure (hence an anti-structure) among individuals that generates at the level of behavior new social structures that accommodate the break through a process of reintegration, a process achieved at the expense of the old structures. Stepto literalizes *communitas* in African-American narrative: "Dubois's valiant search for spatial expression of *communitas* [involves] nothing less than his envisioning fresh spaces in which black and white Americans discover bonds beyond those generated by social-structured race rituals" (70). In protest poetry, *communitas* remains allied with a shared ideology of "spontaneity and freedom" (Turner 49) in social resistance, the evolving means through which resistance may be marshaled and expressed. Protest in this decade of the Depression is consciously mobilized toward "the production of root metaphors, conceptual archetypes, paradigms, models for, and the rest [by] which

subsequent structures may be 'unpacked'" (Turner 50). *Communitas* transforms community; it appears in the protest of the thirties as a farther reach of protest that mobilizes activism by addressing the traumatic consequences of lynching as much as its ongoing threat.

Protest poets of the thirties led by Sterling Brown's example (itself following upon Helene Johnson) depict the brutal conditions of Southern life for blacks through figures that signify historical and ideological contexts of the lynching era and the Great Migration it inspires. The Southern landscapes of the twenties become symbolic geographies, embodying the teleology of communal trauma—broken hearths, broken hearts, terrorism, regressive savagery—as the individual lynching victim before whose awful corpse the poet's diffidence evocatively falters. The modernist lynching figure of this writing affectively mobilizes political awareness as *communitas*, expressed in this case by an anagogy of descriptive and dramatic swerves away from the lynching figure or as a palinodal undoing of the lynching's depiction.

Houston Baker places the violent psychical impress of lynching among the meanings of the "Blue Man," "the feverish ghoulish narrative collective unconscious" (4) that characterized "the rigors of southern black male subject formation" (6):

> I now, revisionarily, proclaim from middle age that such imaginative recitals as the Blue Man were our mythicohistorical archive of black incarceration in the Americas, a monitory chest of bones drifting from fathomless Atlantic depths, a figurative emblem for levitations of mutilated black bodies from burial grounds in piney woods turpentine camps, weeping corpses of cut-down virile black bodies felled by Trusty

> Shooters at Parchman Farm. Our Blue Man was racial memory mythically codified for childhood warning, self-definition, and defense. Blue Man was the oral-cultural and symbolically narrated realization of our black male place in confining spaces, framed by shape-shifting and ever threatening apparatuses designed to harm the black body. (6)

The Blue Man would archive geographical, historical, and gendered forms of violent oppression visited upon blacks, though to appreciate this archive fully is to acknowledge its problematic standing as a biographical figure of even black male experience. Specifically, Baker was unusually privileged within the largely working class world of black communities in the fifties and sixties.[15] In fact, prior versions of my adolescent self, children of the black working-class majority were, for Baker, "muscled-up working class boys irked to violence (against me!) by my 'standard English' grammar of speaking" (8), and, hence, were original sources of subjectivity-inducing fear. Black men, thus, constitute Baker's Blue Man as much as become its victims, and the figure is one of *communitas*, but also of idealization: the nervousness of being black, but also a nervous antithetical confrontation with blackness.

Baker's Blue Man adapts the creative and critical experience of nervousness from Patricia Yaeger: "some writer-critics encounter, imagine, image specters—'dead subjects'—far more nervously, and hence, far more exactingly than others" (29). Behind the swerve from lynching in modernist lynching figures of the thirties lurks *communitas* and nervousness, a nervousness that signifies protest through the depiction of communal

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[15] According to Horton et al., in 1960 58% of U.S. blacks were working class while only 3% were middle class (131). This same study claims blacks have had a working class—as opposed to bottom class or middle class—majority since 1950, a majority that has been overwhelming (70%+) since 1970 (131).

terror and savage regression rather than incapacity to confront the appalling practice of lynching. Baker speaks of this form of protest in saying: "Only the specter invoked and made present by the figure of our imagining, can lead us toward the 'new,' the revolutionary, a modernity of consciousness impelled by the interests of the black majority" (31). The swerving indirection of protest poetry in the thirties transfers the humanity of black American communities as *communitas* by ironizing the mortality of the lynch victim into a nervous voyeurism. This poetic voyeur suggests the trauma of lynching, a trauma affecting black communities in an America freshly exiting its second major lynching epidemic.

Nervousness as *communitas*, however, deconstructs the geographic, historical and gendered limitations of the Blue Man, which—as an archive of white violence—defines more than male subjectivity. In 1926, Helene Johnson published a poem called "A Southern Road" in the single-issue quarterly of the Harlem Renaissance, *Fire!!* Indebted to the use by Toomer and others of landscape to frame the inhabitants of a community, Johnson's lyric ends with a remarkable image that combines the imperative of protest with affective demonstrations of the modernist lynching figure:

> A blue-fruited black gum,
>
> Like a tall predella,
>
> Bears a dangling figure,--
>
> Sacrificial dower to the raff,
>
> Swinging alone,
>
> A solemn, tortured shadow in the air. (13-18)

We know what the walker sees, but not because she says it very directly: the language is only suggestive. The shock of the image is didactic and tensing in the lyric, and illustrates the periphrasis that intensifies throughout protest of the thirties. The dusty, literal Southern road of the title is identified with its traveler: "yolk colored tongue / parched" (1-2), whistling a "lazy little tune" (3): this synecdoche is one Johnson used before, in her very different lyric, "The Road." In "A Southern Road," Johnson's "streaming line of beauty"(6)—open, and expressing the possible—is set against the forest where the lynched victim hangs, a place "pregnant with tears" (8), though divinely intended as "a hidden nest for beauty" (9). The poem's final, disturbing image is come upon suddenly, as suddenly as any unsuspecting black traveler might come upon a lynched body, the experience the poem mimics. As scholar Leon Litwack points out in the book accompanying the important photographic exhibit of lynch photography, Without Sanctuary: "The idea [of lynching] was to make an example" (16). Exposing the metonymy endemic to race-thinking, Litwack goes on to quote a black witness of the day who articulates the fundamental rationale of lynching as the trauma of white control: "*one Negro swinging from a tree will serve as well as another to terrorize the community*" (Sanctuary 16, original emphasis). In the poem Johnson represents this terrorism as a psychological counterpart to the tortured and abandoned body, the raff—as in riff-raff—being both rural whites and blacks, the lyncher and the victims. Johnson protests the remoteness of rural conditions that allows white supremacy to flourish as the tradition of the color line's oppressive corralling and inherited traumas. Yet, the off-hand denigration of rural blacks tells the distance between worldly poet and rural "folk," even as the experience of the lyric dwells in a rural setting.

On Johnson's eidetic road, her traveler, "[hums] up the crest of some / soft sloping hill" (4-5). The speaker of Johnson's poem observes omnisciently, with the distance of Romantic voyeurism, though we do not know what the traveler does or may want to do for a living: the traveler is either a migrant worker or musician, or simply heading North. Johnson's poem ably prefigures thirties' protest where modernist lynching figures appear in nervously indirect language—language that (according to what I have quoted from Baker) would be more exacting in its protest and more effective in invoking *communitas*. Sometimes, however, the language is less nervous and *communitas* is, nevertheless, ably invoked. In these second instances, if lynching happens, it gets dramatically undone as a palinode. The didactic focus of this palinode, a protest of trauma, goes almost without saying, as does the eidetic nature of the refocusing that dynamically affirms a personhood transcending lynching. The aspect of protest directly comprising *communitas* is more evasive.

To explore it, I'll turn to the strangest poem on lynching Langston Hughes ever wrote: "Lynching Song" (1936). In this poem, the indirections ultimately point to a polemical desire for retaliation by the black community against terrorizing racial violence. Written in the decade of Sterling Brown's Southern Road, and in its original form the third "song" of "Three Songs about Lynching" (1936), "Lynching Song" is both the climax of the sequence and a discrete lyric. The first two poems of the sequence, "Silhouette" (1936) and "Flight"(1936), are indirect and didactic. In the first, lynching is represented as a meiosis ("They've just hung a nigger"[3]), putting the lynching in the past and off-stage from the main action, a *communitas* of white viciousness: a fainting white woman tended to by a "white lynch advocate" (Ramazani168). In the second,

lynching is proleptic but no less didactic for the shift in temporal emphasis ("Hurry, black boy, hurry! / Or they'll swing you to a tree." [7-8]), and represents a black man on the run from the terror of the Blue Man, denying interracial sexual interest ("No, I didn't touch her. / White flesh ain't for me" [5-6]). In its abject terror, the second depiction gives further voice to the specter of interracial sexual life haunting the color line as an experience of being "in place." Hughes's marginal notes for "Silhouette" call for "satirically sentimental music" (Collected 684) on violin, while those for "Flight" call for oboe and drums to play "a sylvan air with an undercurrent of fear and death" (Collected 685). In the first the suggestion is "the show is over," while the second takes place before the horrible carnival begins.

"Lynching Song" is the third lyric, and meant to be accompanied by "a blast of childish trumpets full of empty wonder" (Collected 685). In it, Hughes's voice is resentfully didactic, attaining a new tragicomic register. "Lynching Song" opens with the voice of the mob in a kind of chant:

> Pull at the rope!
>
> O pull it high!
>
> Let the white folks live
>
> And the black boy die. (1-4)

The gesture of spatializing racial difference in the image of hoisting the body of the lynch victim is a familiar one in Hughes's lynch poems (Ramazani 168-169). In this particular poem, also spatialized is the imperative—contrasted along this racial difference—of the act of lynching, namely the imperative that "white folks live" through and in the face of the death of an annihilated and denigrated blackness, "the black boy." In the second

stanza, though, Hughes, always a poet of repetition, intentionally wrecks the imperative: "Let the black boy spin / While the white folks die" (7-8). This reversal emphasizes the motion of the black boy over the static white crowd, and is Hughes's didactic mimicry of that crowd manipulated by the lack of reflection endemic to group mentality. What happens when the poem reverses? Does the spinning corpse come to signify time? Why will the white folks die? Another option is to see this inversion as Hughes at his most resentful. With inversion, Hughes anticipates a reversal of this racial violence, the "spin" both literally and figuratively an upheaval of "revolution" well before the term becomes a twentieth-century nationalist cliché.

Hughes's eidetic aspect appears in the enigmatic marginal note insisting that the childish blast be "[full of] life not dead at all" (Collected 649). In the closing two stanzas of this poem, the eidetic force of the victim increasingly effaces the act of lynching until the second stanza's reversal trembles the first stanza's structure of contrasts. Italicization in the third stanza suggests incredulity at the reversal, which disarms both the poem's sentiments and any possible sentimentality: "*What do you mean—*" (10) is an aporia of emotional response. Is our sympathy for the victim and abhorrence at the act supposed to invert into resentment of white lynchers and sadistic pleasure at their death? Does Hughes substitute this inversion for the traditional didactic expectation of conversion? If this reversal is meant in this way, then the object of our emotional response shifts with the tenor of the poem. The lynched body embodies a palinode in its phrase: "NOT I" (15); it erases its own affective claim on our emotions, lightening the complex issue of white culpability and undoing the figure of the lynched body with the sense that whatever happens next will contain its trace. This embodiment is not graceful, but Hughes's rough

handling of the possibility of collateral racial violence signals *communitas* as a didactic motif in protest, and is prescient of the race riots striking Harlem in 1936. "NOT I" shifts the poem's subject, and signals a move to anti-structure; the victim is eidetically parsed out of the lynching, and we readers are called to become agents in violent social struggle. Such an indirect invocation may be the surest indication that this poem conceals a revenge scenario, and renders *communitas* through reaction, not individual suffering.

Southern Ways

Sterling Brown and Countee Cullen issue the most significant literary protests of the thirties. Their work follows these patterns, invoking *communitas* through an indirect depiction of the violence of lynching, or as a palinode on whatever lynching appears. These nervous versions of the Blue Man as lynch figure noticeably elaborate on the didactic modes of modernist lynching figure. This tendency to evade the depiction of lynching in poetry that marshals resistance to its horror points to the reciprocity of the affective and didactic features of lynching in later generations of poets. The protest tradition suggests that not only damaged bodies but also damaging psychic traces in the community had to be dealt with as lynching declined.

In the crucial protest volume of the thirties, Sterling Brown's Southern Road, such poems as "Children of the Mississippi," "Southern Road," and the Slim Greer series present lynching in the manner I have outlined. Generally, Southern Road includes the experience of lynching in a meditation on *communitas* through the late "migratory mobility" of blacks during the major period of African-American urbanization. The mobility was beyond the economic, social, and intellectual constraints of the color line,

but also a risky exportation of it, as Marlon Ross discusses in Manning the Race; although focusing on the early years of this migration, his insight is relevant to later years:

> Motivated by a desire for greater social and economic opportunity, the mass migration necessarily raises in the mind of the dominant society the specter of a black mass unloosed from the social and sexual restraints enforced by Jim Crow through modes of sexualized racial intimidation and torture that frequently culminated in lynching. (Ross 26).

The population shifts of blacks in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century were tied to social ambitions and rampantly dogged by both racial superstition and sexual stereotype. During the twenties, black migration rose continuously, as did white migration during the same decade (Tolnay 243). Historically, this information underlines the signal connotation of Brown's title: the southern road as a version of Whitman's "long brown path" (1.3), the way out from Southern oppression as a Whitmanian "efflux of the soul" (7.1, 2; 8.1). Fittingly, among the final images in Southern Road is the hike in the metamorphosing setting of "Mill Mountain":

> Such little time for such a startling change
> A brief while climbing hills, and what we knew
> Too well as turbulence has grown at last
> To beauty—quiet, almost faerylike. (15-18)

This scene of stargazing is an eidetic voicing of the African-American rural community for the speaker of the poem as well. A dramatically memorial moment, this return evokes the speaker's first approach to the city and is enacted for the benefit of the "Child" with

whom the speaker walks. The Child personifies the younger, irreverent generations described in "Children's Children": "They have forgotten / What had to be endured—" (20-21). What had to be endured was, of course, lynching, chiefly, and other affronts to enfranchisement and dignity that were supposed to accompany freedom from captivity and forced labor. For the speakers of "Mill Mountain" and "Children's Children," the urban destination has been reached and a life has been made; they are late in the story of black migratory mobility: a new generation whose experience is molded in an entirely different context is emerging, yet their experience is inexorably tied to the deplorable Southern social conditions that moved their forebears to want to sing songs of the open road.

The invocation of Southern society is Southern Road's context and part of its didactic quality, for by its publication there is much to remember in America's shifting cultural and historical landscape. The ease with which the child falls asleep in "Mill Mountain" and the giggles and sighs of the children in "Children's Children" tell of the gap in experience between the emancipated and migratory older generations and the younger generation raised in the newly adopted urban centers. The gap outstrips the differences implied by the contrasting terms "rural" and "urban," because the gap signifies new settings and qualitatively different formative experiences.

After a brief spike in the early twenties, lynching also precipitously declined in Southern states throughout that decade (Tolnay 30). Though certainly still an oppressive social threat, statistically by 1932 lynching had become increasingly an empty threat, one claiming fewer than a dozen victims per year—still chilling, but far from the blood-curdling terrorism of the "bloody '90s" when the number of African-American lynch

victims was routinely measured by the score. In the late twenties, Walter White, chief NAACP investigator of lynchings, spoke of "indications of betterment" (171) in a chapter called "The Changing Scene" from his classic study, Rope and Faggot. On January 12, 1930, The New York Times ran a short piece on an optimistic politician from Atlanta who predicted: "Lynching will be a lost crime by 1940" (Ginzburg 181), while in 1933 The New York Herald Tribune ran an article that declared "Mob Violence Disappearing from American Way of Life" (Ginzburg 207). Ironically, twenty-one years later, just before Emmet Till's vicious lynching, The Washington Post published an editorial that declared the "End of Lynching" (Ginzburg 240). Kenneth Jackson has shown in The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930 that even the most infamous group of racial terror and violence had seriously declined in the cities of the South by 1930, despite having reached an apogee of membership and—via elected officials and police forces—political enfranchisement in the early twenties.

Lynching declined throughout the twenties not only because of increased public opposition, but also because the potential victims of lynching and their would-be lynchers were on the move. We can infer that the marked and remarkable flamboyance of urban black life—the life and style of the New Negro—is in many ways drawn from a sense of escape, an inaccurate sense because, according to Jackson, such popular migratory destinations for blacks as Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey were among the top ten states for Klan membership between 1915 and 1944 (237).

A Way Out

"Mill Mountain" is in a section of Southern Road called "Vestiges, " a title speaking to what affectively abides in the present, and not solely to what is had in remembrance as cultural memory, which after all was largely forged in the trauma the present seeks to overcome rather than to inherit. What remains underscores the second meaning of the volume's title: the Southern road, an oppressive and damaging Southern society to be left behind. Life, however, intervenes, and as much as Brown presents narratives of escape and migration in Southern Road, he also narrates the decision not to move or an ability to move hampered by obligations. Brown crystallizes the "southern road" as a way out and as a way of life in a penitentiary chain gang. The unhappy irony is straightforward: this black migration is one (and the many) for whom even movement on a small scale is not physically—and by implication psychically—possible. There is no exodus from Southern society for these men:

> Doubleshackled—hunh—
>
> Guard behin';
>
> Doubleshackled—hunh—
>
> Guard behin';
>
> Ball an' chain, bebby,
>
> On my min'. (25-30)

The ball and chain is the "ball and chain" of matrimony (read: familial constraints) and the literal shackles he wears as a prisoner. Individually, he thinks of escape and the woman to whom he would escape. More cunningly, Brown uses the ball and chain as a symbol for the constraints from migration, felt by many who did not leave or who left but

could not go very far. Historically, the decision to migrate was not an easy one: James Cobb and others have discussed how early blues songs embody larger ambivalences of Southern blacks toward leaving "family, friends, [and] familiar surroundings" (101). To be "doubleshackled" is to be cuffed to the ball and chain and to other prisoners. This second set of shackles, the shackles of *communitas*, are ties to kin and community invalidating the decision to migrate; after all, the decision to prefer the unfamiliar is often easier for a frustrated and impetuous younger generation: "Gal's on Fifth Street—hunh—/ Son done gone" (14).

Brown contrasts physical captivity and imprisonment to a psychological determination to allay despair, if not to construe hope through the promise of leaving. The responses to the opening calls of the poem are telling: "Ain't no rush, bebby, / Long ways to go" (5-6) and then "Got me life, bebby, / An' a day" (11-12). "Long ways to go" implies despair allayed by casting time as distance, a paradoxically static journey whose inevitable end is death. Death was the beginning of this journey, too; the convict has murdered a man: "Burner tore his—hunh— / Black heart away" (12-13). We do not know specific preceding events, but we can intuit some things: in particular, that given the comforting role of the hearth, the speaker's situation does not match that of Georgie Grimes in that character's eponymous poem. The "black heart" here signifies a white man: lynchings often followed from black sharecroppers cheated by white landowners; these sharecroppers sought enfranchisement and had no doubt also been initiated into the violence of what Richard Nisbett calls the Southern culture of honor.

However it began, the journey is a "long ways," though the speaker says, "Chain gang nevah—hunh— / Let me go," a paradox designating this journey as existential, not

physical. The southern road, then, also has an existential stratum meant to dramatize its interior consequences. The existential stratum in which this journey takes place closely matches the sort identified with African-American women's writing of the time (see McDowell 14). These matching strata may be the most direct intersections of Brown's poem and book *Southern Road* with Helene Johnson's "A Southern Road," despite the former being hyper-masculine in its depiction.

Travelin' Rascal

Brown structures the stanzas of "Southern Road" around the traditional AAB pattern of blues and styles the monologue as a song. These formal choices bring another figure to frame the poet and the individual/collective chain-gang: the blues artist, in this case also an embodiment of the Blue Man. The blues artist, whether male or female, historically embodies the problem and promise, the dilemma and hope of the mobility at the heart of Brown's title poem. In light of this mobility's massive population shifts Cobb cautions:

> For all the anger and dissatisfaction they may have expressed, however, with their emphasis on rambling and impermanence as well as escape, the blues were no more the music of those who had decided to leave [the South] than of those who had decided to stay or, perhaps more so, those who were unable to decide. (99)

This point validates what Brown presents in his poems. Though there are several blues-structured poems, Southern Road contains just five pieces with "blues" in their titles. Of these five, one—"A New St. Louis Blues"—is set outside the South. Of the remaining

four, two are ambivalent about the possibility of migration—"Kentucky Blues" and "Memphis Blues"—and two dramatize the decision to leave—"Riverbank Blues" and "Tin Roof Blues." There can be no doubt that for Brown—as in history—the blues was intimately linked to both the will to leave the South and despair at Southern society. What is more, for the protest poets of the thirties, the representation of the lynched corpse is eidetically commemorated through "a kind of blue haunting" (Gussow 28), one that blues scholar Adam Gussow argues uncannily asserts the presence of lynching as a double meaning to the blues. The blues musician can be linked to the Blue Man, embodying fear ascribed to whites in the face of black mobility. As Cobb summarizes: "the blues offered an alternative lifestyle in which rambling, hedonism, aggressive sexuality, and a general disregard for authority were the norm" (98). Such a description may seem a far cry from the elegantly sympathetic characterizations of Brown's work, unless we consider what such a figure embodies for many blacks of the period: a living representation, however besotted, of self-determination and liberty, a way out of a way of life. In this way the representation of the blues musician in literature as well is related to the anti-structure of *communitas*, for individual sympathies with the blues musician's break from social structure is a ground of protest of that social structure.

Brown's Slim Greer is like the blues musician, and is the great example of the seeker of a way out of Southern oppression. Often this search is a direct confrontation with the threat of lynching, intended to bring lynching in as an indirect "punchline" of the adventure. Joanne V. Gabbin in Sterling A. Brown: Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition characterizes Slim Greer as "the familiar trickster in the folktale who by strength of his wit and his agility deceives, eludes, and outsmarts his opponents" (136).

Gabbin goes on to identify the threat of lynching that hovers in the first poem of the series "Slim Greer," while commenting on Brown's comic purposes:

> The outcome of Slim's adventures could have been the same as that delivered in the tragic tale "Frankie and Johnny." Yet [in "Slim Greer"] Brown, turning the events around for his hilariously funny purpose, has Slim make tracks "with lightnin' speed." He skillfully takes the timeworn material of racial jokes, exploited and repeated on the minstrel stage, and reshapes it in such a way that the humor is intraracial. The butt of the joke is no longer the ludicrously dressed "coon" who wears "no. fourteen shoes" but the hypocrisy of sexual racism. (137)

For Gabbin, then, part of Slim Greer's "trick" is achieving a comic take on black experience without resorting to minstrel humor; Slim is no dimwitted, physically incongruous minstrel, but if sexual racism is the butt of Slim's joke, then the "joke" is lynching, the serious consequence of Slim's confidence games.

In most of Slim's poems, even one as plainly outrageous as "Slim in Atlanta," Slim engages in risky behavior that brings him to the verge of lynching. Lynching as such never appears but its avoidance expresses the strategy of indirection related to lynching, which through Slim becomes an affective presence and to that extent eidetic. Yet Slim's are also searchingly didactic protests of the sacrosanct Southern social structures authorizing lynching. For instance, satirizing the well-known fact that even the slightest behavior may be deemed worthy of lynching, Brown portrays a persnickety Atlanta of powerful white racists passing laws on black laughter:

Down in Atlanta,

De whitefolks got laws

For to keep all de niggers

From laughin' outdoors. ("Slim in Atlanta," 1-4)

The rule is silly, but lethally enforced: "Dontcha laugh on de street, / If you want to die old" (11-12). Slim's reaction at the sight of "a hundred shines / in front of [de booth]" (14-15) is flamboyantly absurd. Jumping the queue, he:

Pulled de other man out,

An' bust in de box,

An' laughed four hours

By de Georgia clocks. (26-29)

The exaggeration deepens the comic effect of the passage because Slim "laughed till dey sent / Fo' de ambulance" (43-44). Presumably the ambulance is for the "*Three* hundred niggers[/]Some holdin' deir sides, / Some holdin' deir jaws "(27, 29-30). Underwriting this hyperbole is a didactic echo of the denigrating place—marking of the color line, the trauma of lynching as the communal bond of black Southerners living in America: everyone waits because they'll moan in pain rather than be lynched or see Slim lynched. Beneath the humor is another standard scenario of historical lynching: Slim the stranger wanders into town, and his unfamiliarity with local "race rules" gets him lynched.

Lynching haunts Slim's final poem even as it is Brown's most blank statement of contempt for Southern social structure. Not published in the original first edition of Southern Road, "Slim in Hell" appeared in the same year as Southern Road, and serves as a coda for the series. In the opening of this poem Slim has died. Did Slim go to heaven

or hell? Well, both, but the first line establishes against the title that "Slim Greer went to heaven" (1). Given his reception at "the pearly gates," we assume Slim died naturally, too old to roam anymore:

> You been a travelin' rascal
>
> In yo' day.
>
> You kin roam once mo';
>
> Den you comes to stay. (5-8)

This is poetic justice: St. Peter tells Slim to roam "once mo'" presumably because he had grown too old to roam in his former life. The hyperbolic (and eidetic) comedy of Slim is hardly clearer than in this situation: Slim earns angelic wings and gets sent to Hell. Told to "see / All dat is doing" (14-15), Slim explains to no less an infernal figure than the Devil his reasons (or rather lack of them) for being in Hell: "Oh, jes' thought / I'd drap by a spell"(49-50). Slim's tour of hell polemically reminds him of the American South as a parodic version of Dante's Inferno:

> An' he say—"Dis makes
>
> Me think of home—
>
> Vicksburg, Little Rock, Jackson,
>
> Waco, and Rome."
>
> Den de devil gave Slim
>
> De big Ha-Ha;
>
> An' turned into a cracker,
>
> Wid a sheriff's star. (85-92)

The crucial moment of the passage is “de big Ha-Ha” of the Devil. Even in death, lynching is the literal threat and the serious joke—”de big Ha-Ha”—of the passage. Having avoided lynching in life, will the passed-on Slim get lynched because hell is the American South, after all? No, the now winged Slim “Lit out from de groun’” (94) and returns to St. Peter, but he leaves behind the suggestion that the impact of lynching reaches its immediate survivors as a traumatic spiritual imprint.

Lynching, Voided and Avoided

In the thirties, a figure like Slim signified hope as well as liberty unbounded, if accidental. Ever skirting lynching in his narratives, Slim approaches and satirizes lynching because he always has a way out no matter how entangled by Southern ways he gets. The evasion of lynching in the Slim poems is not different in purpose from the evasive trope for lynching in “Sam Smiley” (1932). In this poem, Brown approaches a miasma of racial contrasts and emotional upheavals. Smiley becomes a movingly affective representative of the tragically broken hearths of a black community terrorized by lynching even when ardent in the defense of freedom. Smiley belongs to those characters in Brown’s gallery for whom the Southern road comes to signify Southern social structure as a prison. Yet in the brutal first stanza of the poem this way of life is unmasked—deconstructed, if you will—as the command to violence toward whites that troubles Hughes in “Lynching Song” is shown as already upside down:

> The whites had taught him how to rip
>
> A Nordic belly with a thrust

Of bayonet, had taught him how

To transmute Nordic flesh to dust. (1-4)

There is a clear racial basis to this violence, and the sadism which breeds ambivalence in Hughes's poem, for Brown, has a didactic, alchemical dimension: note, the word "transmute" and the phrase "had taught him how" each suggests that this violence against "Nordic flesh" is a special skill—the very opposite of the frenzied public violence of lynching at home. Interestingly, the secret into which Smiley gets initiated through the war involves the insight that this very war was "inexplicably color blind" (8), which by extension suggests the artificial nature of the color line. Ten years after the publication of Southern Road, Sterling Brown published an essay entitled "Count Us In" (1945), in which he excoriates the myth of Southern docility versus Northern militancy among blacks. Often his point is to show how Southern blacks regularly balked at their treatment in the South and organized in resistance to this treatment, but Brown also manages to convey just how entrenched the color line is in Southern society; the title "count us in" is a demand spoken in the face of practices of Southern exclusion: "With a few honorable exceptions, newspapers, radio programs, and motion pictures (omitting of course, Negro newspapers and newsreels for Negro theaters only) have done little to convince Negro soldiers of belonging" ("Count" 72). Given Jim Crow's reign, it takes no stretch to feel the pathos of Smiley when, filled with "truths that he could never forget," he returns to the Southern road.

The tragic conflict develops at the site of Smiley's most emotionally vulnerable relationship. During the war, Brown writes of Smiley:

And through the lengthy vigils, stuck

In never-drying stinking mud,

He was held up by dreams of one

Chockfull of laughter, hot of blood. (13-16)

This "one," the eidetic memory of whom offers hope to Smiley in the desperate landscape of war, is also a source of enthusiasm for Smiley on his journey home after the war: "Hot-stepping boy! Soon he would see / The girl who beat all girls in France" (19-20). Smiley is depicted as literally dancing home from the war. Yet that home is in the South, where at the time, the color line had a status akin to divine law. His world is well lost as Smiley returns from the war to the despicable social arrangements along the Southern road and of southern ways of life.

"Sam Smiley" turns tragic when the hero returns home, and in doing so evokes communal suffering. The color line's intention to keep blacks in place is directly demonstrated when Smiley returns: "He found his sweetheart in the jail, / And took white lightning for his friend" (23-24). White lightning is grain alcohol: Smiley becomes an alcoholic after finding his love in prison; this prison is of the color line as well, for "white lightning" also implies the suddenness, the unexpectedness of the re-emerging of hardened, racial categories in Smiley's experience. In a situation expressive of the twisted logic of the color line, we learn that she has been imprisoned for aborting the pregnancy that results from rape, ridding herself of the encounter's offspring because Sam is her love. She dies in jail; the embittered, drunken Sam, who had been taught in the color-blind war how to kill whites, kills her rapist, "a rich white man"(35) described as he "[w]ho knew best why her laugh was dumb, / who knew best why her blood was still" (31-32). The stage is set for his lynching.

If in "Lynching Song" Hughes unravels the psychotic logic of racial lynching with a didactic intention of calling for retaliation, Brown depicts the inexorable re-constitution of this logic in the South of Sam Smiley's narrative, revealing an affective strata of Smiley's lynching, predictably depicted periphrastically. Hughes shifts the object of emotional response from the body of the lynch victim to the community's response, which also marks a limit of emotional appeal in the didactic mode. Brown—as in Helene Johnson's "A Southern Road"[16]—tropes the lynching with irony and litotes, signifying the event by altering the didactic value of his previous terms into an eidetic, affective figure. Brown's term "buckdancing" reifies an unlynchable human element of *communitas* even as it depicts Smiley's lynched body. For Brown the enthusiasm of Smiley's buckdance is undone by racial categories cancelled by war but reinstated by Southern whites; however, the trace of his enthusiasm is an eidetic check pragmatically similar to sexual attraction in Toomer's work: something lynching is powerless to stop. The scene resembles Johnson's in the periphrastic swerve of the language as it eidetically represents the ghastly convulsions of the dying Smiley:

> The oaken leaves drowsed prettily,
>
> The moon shone down benignly there;
>
> And big Sam Smiley, King Buckdancer,
>
> Buckdanced on the midnight air. (43-44)

In these lines, the pretty oak leaves and the benign moon contrast with Smiley's death throes. The contrast figures the color line re-established through Smiley, from whose death Brown imaginatively turns away in a gesture that converts the meaning of Smiley's

[16] The periphrasis of Johnson's lynching indicates an eidetically divine intention of beauty undone by the ugliness of lynching,

buckdance: the force of the contrast given the poem's action conveys the fact of lynching. It is now the buckdance that is upside-down. In the poem's last line, this buckdance is morbid, embued with pathos, signifying the last delimitation of the color line: not a wedding, but a funeral. Yet, this buckdance eidetically signifies the enthusiasm of an unlynchable love beyond the blighted categories of the South: no longer Smiley's dream, perhaps, but that of another of buckdancing at his own wedding.

Countee Cullen's Christologies

Like all of the protest poems we have looked at so far, Countee Cullen's sonnet "Christ Recrucified" depicts lynching indirectly, through an anagogic depiction of lynching as crucifixion. Cullen's anagogic meaning conveys a miraculous spiritual *communitas* as the alternative to a savagely regressive status quo structuring the community of lynchers. Such Christological symbolism adds a powerful spiritual dimension to the anti-structure of *communitas*; individuals who risk breaking from existing social structures do so as an act of political conversion, but also as one of spiritual conversion. Cullen's didacticism then becomes spiritually affective as it weaves additional theological impulses into political polemic on the social structure linked to the color line that makes lynching acceptable.

French critic Jean Wagner long ago established Cullen's obsessive, career-long spiritual struggle between an admired paganism and Christianity. Wagner quotes the sonnet "Christ Recrucified," a poem absent from Gerald Early's otherwise laudable collection of Cullen's work, My Soul's High Song. So far as I know, the poem has been previously printed twice in full. I shall quote the full text as it appears in Wagner's study:

The South is crucifying Christ again
By all the laws of ancient rote and rule:
The ribald cries of “Save yourself” and “Fool”
Din in his ears, the thorns grope for his brain,
And where they bite, swift springing rivers stain
His gaudy, purple robe of ridicule
With sullen red; and acid wine to cool
His thirst is thrust at him, with lurking pain.
Christ’s awful wrong is that he’s dark of hue,
The sin for which no blamelessness atones;
But lest the sameness of the cross should tire,
They kill him now with famished tongues of fire,
And while he burns, good men, and women, too,
Shout, battling for his black and brittle bones. (1-14)

This sonnet is one of Cullen’s finest, and his most fiercely didactic in its mode of naked protest. The formal aspects of this Petrarchan sonnet underscore the poem’s protest: the caesura of the seventh line is powerfully affective, while the stressed “good” of the penultimate line signifies race in stinging manner, clawing the façade of Southern gentility. The poem asks: what gentility, piety, or goodness can be in the South when its men and women become predatory scavengers, foraging for the bones and burnt flesh of him whom sociologist Orlando Patterson has most recently called the “humbled Christ” (169-230)?

Yet for all of Cullen's didactic focus on lynching, one may marvel at how very anagogic the meaning of poem is: lynching is projected through, not stated in, the poem. Our awareness of the poem's meaning is our affective grasp of the poem's imagery. We readers are let in through emotional and spiritual identification with Cullen's unexpressed half, the shadow meaning that imbues "crucifying" with both literal and allegorical significance—literally the crucifixion of Christ, symbolically the "recrucifixion" of black men through the practice of lynching, signalled in the poem by "the famished tongues of fire," as Wagner points out. Yet, the spectacle of lynching, the barbaric tortures that, according to Grace Hale, comprise "a peculiarly modern ritual" (202), are indirectly given, entirely related as the analogue of the tortured Christ, and eidetically reinforced to be sure. Involving, more likely, castration, pistol-whipping, stabbings, and other preparatory mangling of the body in the hope of crippling of the victim's spirit, no American lynching so literally followed Christ's Passion.

Cullen invokes lynching, but never represents one directly, showing instead the dehumanizing social structures validating it as whites scurrying for bones. The final image is apocalyptic and affective, meant to stir the awareness of readers—white and black—into active resistance to such structures. In the vivid absence of the lynch carnival's central spectacle, Cullen offers that spectacle's affect as a sign of the mob's degraded humanity and invokes traces of the victim's eidetic sanctity.[17]

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[17] Cullen's poem may be profitably juxtaposed to Langston Hughes's "Christ in Alabama" (1931). Hughes again gives voice to the lynch mob, as he didactically adopts its racist language, troping the lynch victim into Christ as well. Yet for all the comparatively heightened confrontational immediacy of Hughes's language ("Christ is a Nigger / Beaten and black" [1-2]), he too resorts to indirectness in rendering the poem's central image: "Nigger Christ / on the cross / of the South" (12-14). The lines are certainly a *tour de force* of provocative anguish, and again the *communitas* at which Hughes aims is one of violent, emotional action. Nevertheless, ultimately the poem's crucial symbol is remote from the specific tortures of any lynching, leaving readers to make the affective leap that spurs break from social structure: this Christ is not only beaten, but lynched.

5. On “Black Christ”

Cullen’s ambitious long poem, “The Black Christ,” extends the didactic and spiritual aims of his sonnet, and in doing so becomes the signal representation of the lynching protest that undoes its representation of the lynching literally, as a dramatic palinode. In her recent essay “In My Flesh I see God: Ritual Violence and Racial Redemption in ‘The Black Christ,’” Qiana Whitted reads the lynching at the poem’s center as undone a priori through the personal intervention of Christ. When the protagonist of the poem, Jim, appears before the lynchers, Whitted suggests it is, in fact, a disguised Christ:

> Each with bewilderment unfeigned
> Stared hard to see against the wall
> The hunted boy stand slim and tall;
> Dream born, it seemed, with just a trace
> Of weariness upon his face,
> He stood as if evolved from air;
> As if always he had stood there. . .
> What blew the torches’ feeble flare
> To such a soaring fury now?
> Each hand went up to fend each brow,
> Save his; he and the light were one,
> A man by night clad with the sun.
> By form and feature, bearing, name,

I knew this man. He was the same

Whom I had thrust, a minute past

Behind a door—and made it fast. (668-683)

The major clues that something uncanny is afoot are the aura ("What blew the torches' feeble flare / To such a soaring fury now") and allusively apocalyptic[18] aureole ("A man by night clad with the sun") Jim has suddenly acquired. Whether these constitute the actual presence of Christ or a prodigy is, I think, an open question. The narrator claims to have "made [the closet door] fast" here. In the climactic moment of Jim's reappearance a door is unlocked, only it is ambiguous as to which door it is. Is Jim exiting the closet or entering the house here: "I turned to see a door swing free; / The very door he once came through / to death, now framed for us anew / his vital self" (463-466)? This door could be the front door or a closet.[19] Whichever door one takes it to be, the scene's center of attention is Jim's "vital self," an eidetic term that plainly suggests the human form that may—and here literally does—survive lynching. To me, this vital self is the crucial moment of "the Black Christ" <u>because Jim is the Black Christ</u>. Countee Cullen completes the analogy of Christ with lynching in a daringly imaginative leap that is only intimately tied to a protest of the social structures enabling lynching's acceptance. To describe how daring Cullen's leap and how intimate his protest are, I will turn now to Orlando Patterson's account of what he calls, after Bishop Stephen W. Sykes, the "Christian bi-focal narrative of sacrifice" (219) as an illumination of Cullen's modernist lynching figures.

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[18] See The Book of Revelations 12:1.

[19] I am, in fact, inclined to think it is the latter. A literal black Christ needlessly complicates the drama of the poem while actually undermining rather than enhancing what I take as the poem's crucial event: Jim's resurrection.

A bi-focal narrative depends on two distinct—and in this case, incompatible—accounts of the sources of Christian spiritual identity. There is, on the one hand, the Passional Christ: "spat upon, mocked, spiked, tortured, and accursed" (Patterson 222). On the other hand, there is Christ Resurrected, whose eternal vitality signals "victory over the forces of darkness, sin, chaos, and ignorance" (Patterson 220). According to Patterson, this bi-focal narrative has roots in antiquity and in medieval Europe and gets exported during colonial expansion. When it re-emerges in the American South, Southerners came to radically identify with the latter of the two versions of Christ. This strong identification with Christ Resurrected displaces the significance of the Passional Christ, also bearer of the sins of the world, onto Southern blacks, now bearer of the sins of Southern white communities (Patterson 220-222). Patterson explains that

> something extraordinary happened when the despised, scapegoated, dishonored, humbled, crucified Negro became fused with the despised, scapegoated, dishonored, humbled, crucified Christ. Not only was the Negro symbolically discarded, but in one fell swoop so was the image of the crucified, humbled Christ himself! (222).

As socio-historical explanation of the symbolism of the burning cross, this account is more speculative than D. W. Griffith's Birth of a Nation, which depicts the burning cross as a sign of Anglo-Scottish heritage, ultimately more pagan than Christian. It is, nevertheless, a fine ground from which to observe the mechanisms of Cullen's "Black Christ," and understand how it protests lynching since the annihilation of blackness in American society attempted through lynching was also a symbolic annihilation of sin.

Cullen's depiction of Jim's lynching in the poem depends on both versions of Christ. Anticipating the patterns of Patterson's revisionary synthesis of Christian theology and American history, "Black Christ" uses Jim as a bi-focal figure, handily understood as both the triumphal Christ (Christ Resurrected) and the suffering, humiliated Christ (The Passional Christ). In this case, the dual focus plays out as a dramatic palinode, e.g. Jim appears as triumphal Christ by undoing his suffering as humiliated Christ. Jim's lynching uses the familiar motifs of indirectness—it happens in the distance and there is only aural confirmation—but the passage ends with visual evidence, expressed also with indirectness:

> A cry
>
> So soft, and yet so brimming filled
>
> With Agony, my heartstrings thrilled
>
> An ineffectual reply,—
>
> Then gaunt against the southern sky
>
> The silent handiwork of hate.
>
> Greet, Virgin Tree, your holy mate! (768-774)

Lynching is didactically called "the silent handiwork of hate," and we readers know what the narrator means. This passage affectively invokes virtually all of the motifs I have identified within the evolving modernist protest tradition, in particular the lynching itself is identified with sexuality as the site of the lynching becomes a "Virgin Tree," and the killing itself metaphorized as sexual consummation. This identity between sexuality and lynching takes place in the landscape of lynching, the place dominated by the solitary

personified tree that a speaker addresses. Cullen, furthermore, invokes an explicit mode of sympathy in depicting the existential affect of the lynching:

> There in the dark; I could not stir
>
> From where I sat, so weighted down.
>
> The king of grief, I held my crown
>
> So dear, I wore my tattered gown
>
> With such affection and such love
>
> That though I strove I could not move. (783-788)

The didactic melodrama of the passage belies its centrality to the eidetic identification that signals the nearing end of the poem. The narrator calls himself "the king of grief," and in the attendant imagery of crown and tattered gown ("dear," "affection," and "love" mean their opposite), it is clear that this is also the garb of the Passional Christ: the death of Jim has transferred the violence of lynching onto the speaker.

As Triumphal Christ, Jim powerfully alters the poem in two ways. First, this reappearance cancels the scene of lynching that already transpired (the action is palinodal). Also Jim's reappearance releases the speaker from the transfered role of the Passional Christ. When Jim reappears it is as if the lynching never happened, and this reappearance is a feature of the spiritual side of Cullen's political protest.

> Either I leaped or crawled to where
>
> I last had seen stiff on the air
>
> The form than life more dear to me;
>
> But where had swayed that misery
>
> Now only was a flowering tree

That soon would travail into fruit.

Slowly my mind released its mute

Bewilderment, while truth took root

In me and blossomed into light: (891-899)

This language is that of eidetic commemoration and spiritual transfiguration. The passage makes an oblique allusion to the fig tree cursed by Christ on the road to Jerusalem. The cursed, uncanny lynching tree flowers, signaling miraculous, eidetic resurrection, and the spiritual fruit of the political resistance for which the poem calls: this is the triumph of Christ as a Black Christ. This extended narrative poem ends, then, like Hughes's "Lynching Song" by shifting its emotional focus from the act of lynching into the realm of *communitas*, a belonging among individuals that forms outside conventional social structures and the traumatic subjectivity of the Blue Man. The miraculous survival of this lynching victim signals the promise of spiritual fulfillment in political resistance to lynching.

4: Louis Till and the meaning of Canto 74

Lynching and *Pisan Cantos*?

Outside the evolving stages of the protest tradition, the modernist lynching figure remained more static in form and purpose. By far the most striking non-protest instance of this figure is Ezra pound's representation of Louis Till in *Pisan Cantos*. Few readings of this sequence prepare us to discuss its modernist lynching figure, but as the sequence is written, the executed soldier Louis Till embodies Pound's recovery of racial awareness, an essential awareness to the recovery of personality the sequence embodies. Ronald Bush has notably pointed out that Pound's relationship to Louis Till is an immediate prolegomena to the writing of *Pisan Cantos* (195), but otherwise Louis Till tends to be mentioned only as post-script to the trial of his son Emmet Till, the black teenager from Chicago lynched in Mississippi in 1955. The older Till was important to Pound's composing and arranging the fragments of *Pisan Cantos*, and his execution is a crucial nexus therein, ultimately announcing themes of African heritage and New World experience as well a uniquely explicit focus on black American experience. Louis Till's execution itself has the contours of a lynching, and is in part an instance of what Toni Morrison calls American-Africanism. In this case, however, the "dark, abiding, signing" (5) figure is consciously invoked, and defined by the generic strategy of the Cantos, a strategy more lyric and dramatic than narrative, and therefore, overturning in U.S. modern poetry some instances of what Morrison sets out as the imaginative consequences of the U.S. racial situation for white authors: here and in the poems of Eliot and Stevens

value accrues to the representation of "whiteness" as a positive term in insistent play with an equally positive "blackness," i.e. whiteness is not solely as a null abstraction binarily opposed to an ahistorical plenum of blackness. Pound actively invokes Till and blackness, and does so to learn himself, fitting himself to the color line first by crossing it through racial identification.

In the sequence, Pound turns to Till's body as the site of his own existential restitution through memory, racial awareness, and the primordial immediacy of present experience. These motifs, grafted onto the sequence because of his prison experience, derive from patterns Pound set prior to incarceration, and though the conditions under which this sequence of cantos was composed could not have been foreseen, Pound more or less followed through on plans set before his incarceration as he shaped this section. The new material presented in *Pisan Cantos* is not random, but selectively incorporated into an older plan, shaping its planned scene of instruction into an explicitly racial one. The relationship between the older plan and the newer grafts is clearest in Canto 74 where the later imposition of a fascistic proem radically alters the personal character (and racial dynamics) of *Pisan Cantos*. Indeed, with Louis Till as an annunciatory figure, the gestures of racial awareness in several passages of *Pisan Cantos* highlight these personal motifs with specifically racial—and not always directly racist—implications for Pound's dramatization of his sense of selfhood: Pound's scene of instruction has a racial stratum, placing Pound's use of the moment at hand in meaningful correspondence with his invocation of personal memory through the crux of Louis Till's hanging body.

In his Life of Ezra Pound, Noel Stock quotes a February 1940 letter in which Pound, alluding to aesthetician and philosopher George Santayana, mentions his plan for

the Cantos: “From 72 on we will enter the empyrean, philosophy, [George] Santayana, etc. . .” (376). A few pages later, Stock quotes lines from a letter written in May of the same year that shows Pound already exploring the chiaroscuran imagery so prominent in *Pisan Cantos*: “And a black head under white cherry boughs / precedes us down the *salita*” (386). Chiaroscuro is a term of visual art I borrow through Paul de Man for systematically binary oppositions of theme, image or structure in literary rhetoric (de Man 133-134). As a structural feature of the verse, this chiaroscuro had entered Pound’s circle of modernism early; note the spectral white paired with the “wet, black bough” (2) of “In a Station of the Metro”; Eliot’s wind that “blows the water white and black” (128) in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”; and possibly even in the early version of H.D.’s Helen, whose “white face” and “white hands” are contrasted to her “still eyes[, that were] the luster as of olives” (2-3) in the brief lyric “Helen.”

Typically signaling an emotional flourish, Pound’s black head does not necessarily have a racial connotation. Yet once a modernist lynching figure gets used in *Pisan Cantos* the Africanist suggestions of these chiaroscuran schemas intensifies, and Pound overtly rhymes chromatics with racial phenotype, affirming his own racial identity largely by invoking the historical content of black experience. He uses this content as a ground for learning to assert his personal racial self again. This lynching topos is composite in the sequence’s final version, a figure of Mussolini as well as Louis Till in poetry that, as Massimo Bacigalupo has pointed out, alludes extensively to Villon’s “Ballade des Pendus” (94), and is possibly intended as Pound’s own La Testament. At any rate, this composite nature makes the topos more than an elegizing icon for Mussolini. As a site of antithetical identification derived from Villon’s example, Pound’s

empathy for Louis Till's plight gives rise to an identification with Till's execution that dramatizes Pound's personal recovery as in part a racial education, one distinctly related to his capacity to recognize and invoke cultural traces of U.S. racial distinctions.

Louis Till: A Social History

Louis Till was the father of Emmet Till, the most recognized victim of lynching in United States history. Emmet Till's corpse was recovered from Lake Tallahatchie in Mississippi, and widely published photos of his mutilated body generated awareness of, sympathy for, and discontentment among black Southerners who had suffered such atrocities for generations, helping initiate the Civil Rights era.[20] Despite having helped shape American history, Till's lynching fell well after what most scholars would point to as the "heyday" of lynching: a fifty year period from approximately 1890 to 1940 during which thousands of blacks and even several hundred whites were lynched to the collective witness of hundreds of thousands of (mostly white) spectators in all parts of the United States. Interestingly, until very recently there was debate as to whether Till's death was actually a lynching. The question was raised not because of <u>when</u> this crime happened, but <u>how</u>: only two people were thought to be involved in the killing. The question was silenced, though, when in 2004 the U.S. Department of Justice made Till's slaying the first (and to date, only) federally investigated case of lynching: filmmakers Keith Beauchamp and Stephen Nelson discovered that as many as ten people may have been present at Till's death.

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[20] Hudson-Weems, Clenora. <u>Emmet Till: The Sacrificial Lamb of the Civil rights Movement</u>. Troy: Bedford Publishers 1994.

Where Pound figures in this narrative is obscure until we understand the posthumous role of Louis Till in the murder trial of two of Emmet's killers, the stepbrothers Ray Bryant and J. W. Milam. As several studies of lynching relate, the defense of Bryant and Milam exploited reasonable doubt as to the actual identity of Till's badly mutilated and decomposed body. In his magisterial study At the Hands of Persons Unknown, Philip Dray summarizes: "Till's own mother had identified the body, and [a] ring removed from a finger of the corpse was engraved with the letters 'L.T.,' for Till's father, Louis, who had been killed in the Second World War" (428). Dray is vague on just how Louis Till died, but his vagueness seems a convenient omission.

Jacqueline Goldsby had already given the details of Till's death in her 1996 article "The High and Low-Tech of It: The Meaning of Lynching and the Death of Emmet Till," recently supplemented by the closing chapters of her remarkable study, A Spectacular Secret. Speculating on how these same men, acquitted of murder, could not be indicted even for kidnapping, Goldsby writes:

> In [November 1955,] Bryant and Milam faced kidnapping charges filed in Leflore County. Despite the defendants' voluntary admission that they had forcibly removed Till out of Mose Wright's home, their peers voted not to indict the men on these charges. The grand jury's decision was probably influenced by the sensational information about Emmet Till's father that was widely publicized throughout the Southern press. Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland obtained Private Louis Till's classified army dossier, which showed that the soldier had been tried and convicted of raping two women and murdering another while he was

> stationed in Italy during World War II. Supreme Allied Field Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the order of execution that authorized Private Till to be hung on July 2nd, 1945. [The] documents insinuated that the criminal links between father and son were biological: Emmet Till was following the footsteps of his lascivious and murderous father. (252)

The phrase "killed" in World War Two typically suggests death in combat. Given that the German surrender to Allied forces took place on May 8th (the annual V-E Day celebration), Louis Till's execution actually followed the end of the European leg of the Second World War; what is more, Louis Till was executed as a criminal by the U.S. government. It is clear that the 1955 disclosure of Louis Till's death was meant not just to "aid Till['s] Lynchers," as the headline of New York's *Daily Worker* read, but also to stem the tide of fomenting outrage and solidarity among black Americans which had in the days just before rallied crowds across the nation: 9,500 in Washington D.C.; 3,500 in Gary, Indiana; 1,000 in Flint, Michigan, following what seems to have been the speaking circuit of Mamie Till, Louis Till's estranged wife, after Emmet's funeral (Daily Worker 1).

Louis Till's execution was a punishment for capital crimes of rape and murder. Both the Chicago Defender and New York's Daily Worker reported on the implications of the published execution orders. They also reported the shocking fact that neither Mamie Till nor her son were aware of the circumstances surrounding Louis Till's death. The Defender reports:

> Army records showed that [Mamie Till] was informed by telegraph and letter dated July 13, 1945 that her former husband had died July 2

> 'due to willful misconduct,' a phrase often used by the Army in such cases, pending further inquiries from the family.

Army records further revealed that on July 7, 1948 a Chicago lawyer, Joseph Tobias [wrote] the Army on behalf of "wife and child."

> [The Army] refused to make public its reply on the grounds it was legal correspondence and privileged. (Defender 1)

Whatever the reply, it offered no information on the offences for which Till was court-marshaled and hanged: "[kidnapping] three Italian women, murdering one and raping the two others" (Defender 1). For the purposes of this study, the words of Mamie Till's lawyer, William Henry Huff, are striking: "It is part of the foundation of this country that there is no corruption of the blood. Whatever happened to the father does not endure to the son" (Defender 1). In history and literature, Louis Till is a torturous foreshadowing of his son's fate, and he quickens *Pisan Cantos*.

As a modernist lynching figure, Louis Till is circumstantially compelling. Scholars Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck have noted that while the combined accusation of rape and murder accounted for only 1.9% of lynchings in the American South between 1882 and 1930, 37.3% of these lynchings were from accusations of murder and 29.2% from accusations of sexual assault (Tolnay and Beck 48). Though not directly related to Louis Till's situation, we can admit the validity of the claim made by such activists as Ida B. Wells, W. E. B. DuBois and others that many lynchings were not the consequence of an actual crime or a crime rightly solved. In the case of Louis Till, shortly after the news of his execution broke Jet Magazine carried a story saying Till's "World War II unit buddies in Chicago contended that Pvt. Louis Till was 'railroaded' to his death for rape

and murder in a 'strange, hush hush atmosphere in Italy" ("GI Buddies" 5). One of these "buddies" states plainly: "Till never confessed the crime and we felt he was innocent. It is inconceivable that the big, playful fellow could be a criminal" ("GI Buddies" 5). This criminal physiology is suspect as Alice Kaplan has pointed out that Louis Till was convicted of domestic violence prior to his military service (Kaplan 11). The Jet article gives a fuller story of the events behind Till's experience in the Army, suggesting Till was one of 127 "Negro [non-commisioned officers] 'busted' [by white MP's]" ("GI Buddies" 5) after riots in North Africa. In Till's unit four men were "whisked from the unit and carried to the stockade in another area" ("GI Buddies" 5). The article goes on to say that "later, all of Till's records were taken from the company and none of the outfit's Negro leaders was allowed to see any material on the case" ("GI Buddies" 5). Interestingly, the article implies that much of this could be connected to "the mischief" Louis Till "always got into," including a circumstance wherein Till was caught by Army MP's impersonating an Arab, shortly before a crackdown on such fraternization ("GI Buddies" 5).

More than crime, Tolnay and Beck's percentages suggest the racist and delusory sexual and physical paranoia undergirding the practice of lynching. In the same piece in which she points to Louis Till's violent past, Alice Kaplan talks of "Plot E" where there are "eighty [graves belonging] to African-American soldiers [from World War II], all of them tried and convicted in U.S. Army courts-martial of crimes of rape and murder. That means that 83 percent of the men executed in Europe, North Africa and The Mediterranean Theaters of Operation were African-Americans" (Kaplan 11). In light of this paranoia, the color line rendered African-American women as nymphomaniacal and

supernaturally glamourous, holding to this term's original meaning of deluding—often sexual—enchantment.[21] In an unfortunate pairing, the color line relegates African-American men to stereotypes of criminal violence and perversion. Given the federal government's inability to pass federal lynching legislation and lynching's pervasiveness in regions outside the South, it is safe to assume these stereotypes were pervasive in many regions of the United States, and not just in the Southern states.

Beyond the question of innocence or guilt, the execution of Louis Till exemplifies what Rene Girard calls a "collective resonance of persecution" or "[an act] of violence [that is] legal in form but stimulated by the extremes of public opinion" (13). The relevant issue for construing the lynching topos in *Pisan Cantos* is how fair a trial of the period needed to be in order to convict a black male on these specific charges, particularly a physically imposing black combat veteran. Louis Till's is a case where, to quote to Rachel Blau DuPlessis's analysis of Wallace Stevens's "Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise," lynching "is both there and not there" (58). Insofar as lynching is there in *Pisan Cantos* it announces a new major structural emphasis on black Americans that extends beyond the sequence and is a theme across this later period of Pound's writings.

At the Disciplinary Training Center

Ezra Pound's work dovetails with social history in Canto 74, the first of *Pisan Cantos*:

> Pisa, in the 23rd year of the effort in sight of the tower
>
> and Till was hung yesterday

[21] In the context of modernism, it is helpful as Rachel Blau DuPlessis reminds us to recall Wallace Stevens' Victoria Clementina: "She too is flesh"[9].

for murder and rape with trimming (74.170-172)

For Pound, a fascist sympathizer, "the effort" is the rise of Mussolini's regime after Il Duce's March on Rome in 1922 (Sieburth 122). Given the speed with which Pound drafted his cantos and their detailing of the moment at hand, one can assume that *Pisan Cantos* were undertaken or at least freshly underway the day after Louis Till died, July 3rd 1945. The date fits any timeline of the war's end, Pound's incarceration, his subsequent breakdown, and his drafting of *Pisan Cantos*.

The date I have offered is well after April 29th of the same year, the date that Mussolini and several members of his regime were executed by Italian partisan soldiers who then strung him up "by the heels at Milano" (74.5), as Pound's fascistic proem states, offering a variant on the figure of lynching. All sources concur that Pound was officially taken into custody on May 3rd, yet with the poem underway in July it is October before the proem gets inserted. Its date of composition is not known, though there is active debate on this topic. Humphrey Carpenter speculates—without apparent basis—that the proem was the first thing Pound composed (670). Massimo Bacigalupo agrees, basing his stance on one of the sequence's allusions to Confucius, and pointing out "there is no proof that Pound had not written [the proem] early on (on a piece of toilet paper, later in possession of James Laughlin) and had always intended to place [it] in the present position witholding [the proem because of its] objectionable political subject and tone" (98). Most recently, Sieburth portrays this insertion and subsequent restructuring of the poem as an ironic "coming-out" gesture: ironic because Pound, a high priority fascist-sympathizer already indicted on charges of treason, finally reveals his explicit sympathies for fascism in the proem as if these sympathies were not obvious. I suspect that the

implication for my own reading of the Pisan section would be that Louis Till's image is for Pound a variant of Mussolini's fate. In the same essay I have quoted, Bacigalupo continues: "it is not true that the insertion of the opening invocation in any way changes the import of canto 74" (99). This claim ignores the thematic difference Louis Till signals for *Pisan Cantos*. To ignore this difference is to miss a detailed interpretation of passages directly related to the black soldiers. The racial education that Pound experiences in *Pisan Cantos* re-affirms his racial identity, and in the United States racial identity and the accompanying sense of privilege or oppression was traced by a color line along the edges of a lynching figure. Remembering this historical circumstance suggests a different character for Canto 74 and *Pisan Cantos* without the proem.

In this case, the issue of subject rhymes is of further interest because Pound's intention to "rhyme" may be doubted. The basis of this doubt is Pound's Guide to Kulchur, in which he articulates what he takes to be the inadequacy of a Christian polis: "The Anschauung of an individual of, or among, a dominated race, however admirable from some aspects, is not the Anschauung of man who has held responsible office" (38). Anschauung, a common philosophical term, tends to mean idea or view or concept, and we may take this position as an aesthetic judgment against Christian iconography in poetry. Pound's point is straightforward: an oppressed individual sees the world in a substantially different light than one who holds power, and consequently represents a different paradigm than one who holds office or power. Therefore, if Till's execution is in fact a marker of social oppression, one given a particular iconographic relation to the Christian church, then this execution is of necessity something other than a version of Mussolini.

What, then, can we make of Till's execution? Given the conditions under which Pound wrote and the extenuating circumstances of Till's execution, we ought to be surprised that once Pound turns to Till's hanging body he does not turn away, but elaborates upon what he sees. This elaboration signifies that Till's hanged body plays out a role in the allusion to Villon, and allows a host of themes and motifs connected to the other black prisoners of the Disciplinary Training Center to enter. As an instance of the modernist lynching figure, this execution animates the sequence in a manner that specifically calls on Pound's U.S. background.

Like many whites, Pound was fascinated with blacks from the United States—and there may be no term more appropriate than "fascinated." This white fascination is a prominent theme of American (and European) cultural and social history: from early American colonists dancing jigs at parties to "slumming" whites of the early twentieth century to the noted influence on white popular music of whatever is identifiably the perceived musical preference of blacks (Phinney). In Pound, prior to 1940 this fascination partially shows itself in his use of black dialect in letters, translations and other places in his work (though, there are further strata to this usage: his dialect was not always "black"[22]). Between 1931 and 1932, Pound wrote the presidents of three prominent historically black universities—Tuskegee, Fisk, and Howard—about the need for courses emphasizing African civilization and heritage. In the letter to the president of Tuskegee, Pound writes: "There is no reason why a black university should be merely a copy of a white one" (Roessel 212). For that matter, one can also bring up the matter of his allegiance to the anthropologist Leo Frobenius in an era where the standard reading of

[22] Michael North emphasizes Pound's use of black dialect (77-99).

black American culture among whites emphasized rudimentary emotions, charmingly folk primitivism and cloacal sensuality as the "true heritage" of African-Americans.[23]

As a practical explanation for these sympathies, we can also note that Pound's road to incarceration importantly involves black Americans. In The Pound Era, Hugh Kenner tells of how Pound arrived at the Detention Training Center (DTC) "handcuffed to a man accused of rape and murder" (463). This man was likely African-American, as were the majority of criminals in the DTC. Knowing whether this man was Louis Till would settle certain questions about the sources of Pound's sympathies, but this information is unknown. Also, Pound had given himself over to American custody, according to official record, by turning himself in to a regiment of black American soldiers.[24] This latter event occurred after Pound had been held, with his mistress Olga Rudge, by Italian partisan soldiers in a grisly setting: "At [the partisan command post] they were driven into a courtyard. Olga saw that 'the walls were all bloody, they had been shooting people'. Ezra, too, spotted the evidence of summary executions, [and later commented] 'I thought I was finished there and then'" (Carpenter 645). The unusual empathy for Louis Till and, more generally, the black prisoners that Pound incorporates into *Pisan Cantos* is not simply built on Pound's later gratitude to the black soldier who made a makeshift writing desk for him, but is also grounded in sentiments preceding Pound's arrival to his "cage." Pound begins his long incarceration in a flight from execution wherein these first black soldiers are his chief sources of safety.

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[23] Marlon Ross gives a detailed treatment of depictions of black masculinity; also see Rachel Blau DuPlessis for two fascinating readings of the perception and representation of blacks among white modernist authors (81-134).

[24] Details vary as to how Pound came into American custody, but here I follow Humphrey Carpenter's account, which seems the most detailed and reasonable next to that of Julian Cornel, who supplies the official records in this matter.

After his breakdown, Pound had contact with many of the soldiers in the prison camp, some to be reinstated to duty and others slated for execution: "[Pound helped] illiterate and semi-literate prisoners with their correspondence" (Carpenter 669), though Pound's undertaking to write the *Cantos* antedates these events. Speaking of the diaristic character of *Pisan Cantos* across several phases of the manuscript, Bush points out that "the earliest event [Pound] identifies was the hanging [of Louis Till]. [In] another manuscript passage a few pages later he inserts ['July 6th,' a] date only three weeks after he left the cage" (Bush 195). This proximity is surprising since, Noel Stock comments, "it was September before he recovered from his attack [of violent and hysterical terror]" (409).

Mnemonics, Periplum, Chiaroscuro

To understand the significance and consequences of using Louis Till's executed body as a modernist lynching figure in *Pisan Cantos*, we should appreciate how Pound's setting impinges on the sequence. First there is his "death cell," the official U.S. Army name for his prison of three weeks, so-called because such cells held prisoners slated to be executed. Pound variously calls this cell "the cage," "the Gorilla Cage" and, more colorfully, "the a[ss]h[ole] of the army." He was held in the cell for three weeks at the U.S. Army's Disciplinary Training Center. In the Army's official newspaper, *Yank*, it was reported about the DTC that "[life] for the 3,600 prisoners at the center is planned to be tougher than combat, and when the Army tries to make things rugged it does a good job" (16). Richard Sieburth describes Pound's cell as follows: "a six-by-six-foot steel cage, open to the elements, which had been specially reinforced the night before Pound's

arrival with sections of heavy ‘airstrip’ steel mesh” (xiii). Several accounts of Pound’s imprisonment also mention floodlights and an armed guard trained on him twenty-four hours a day, a concrete floor and latrine can as the cell’s only amenities, and high-level orders from Washington (Department of Justice and J. Edgar Hoover) that no one communicate with Pound, though significantly *Pisan Cantos* depicts a black soldier named Whiteside doing so.

After three weeks in this cage, Pound suffered a mental breakdown, one of the most disturbing—and lasting—effects of which was a selective amnesia (Bush 196). Existential anxiety over the consequences of this amnesia for Pound is the basis of many passages in *Pisan Cantos*, and underscores *Pisan Cantos* as Pound’s reifying strata of personal identity against amnesiac loss. Possibly the Odyssean motif of *Pisan Cantos* echoes this loss for Pound, with its refrain of ΟΥΤΙΣ, “nobody,” or, as Pound translates it, “noman,” and (ideogrammatically): “a man on whom the sun has gone down.” In this case the image of night connotes physical and psychological umbrage as liminal hopelessness and obscuranted identity. More specifically, there are passages such as that which occurs in Canto 74 where Pound writes:

> Περσεφόνεια under Taishan
>
> in sight of the tower che pende
>
> on such a litter rode Pontius
>
> under such canvass
>
> in the a.h. of the army
>
> in sight of two red cans labeled “Fire” (74.619-624)

The last two lines of this passage detail Pound's present moment, a technique Kenner identifies with the repeated term periplum: "The *periplous* (a Greek noun Pound transmuted into an unrecorded Latin form, periplum) registers the lay of the land the way it looks now, from here" ("Ezra Pound and Homer" 15). The suddenness and intensity of Pound's periplum transliterates the present moment into a signature for the poet, authenticating his assertion of personal identity grounded in observations of his physical location. The moment is a ward against losing facets of identity as imprisonment drags on, as experience becomes memory and subject to the amnesiac loss hauntingly named a few lines later: "enigma forgetting the times and seasons" (74.636). An oft-quoted passage from one of Dorothy Pound's letters usefully sorts out Pound's anxiety for his readers:

> I am getting stupider as I get older. Of course all these last, apparently, scraps, of cantos, are your self, the memories that make up yr. Person. Is one then only a bunch of memories? I.e. A bunch of remains of contacts with other people? Gawd—but it might be a reason for making the other people's memories contain something pleasant from oneself. (Captivity 131)

The first phrase here reappears in Canto 76 as well. In summing up the role of memory in forming personal identity for *Pisan Cantos,* Dorothy Pound poses her questions speculatively. Ezra Pound in pursuing such memorial reminders responds to her speculations with anxiety:

> Nothing matters but the quality
>
> of the affection—

> in the end—that has carved the trace in the mind
>
> dove sta memoria (76.157-160)

One of the dominant tropes of this anxiety is given in Canto 77 as "we who have passed over Lethe" (77.231). Pound refers to Lethe as both the ancient river of forgetting, and perhaps more importantly the river running through Eden, the Earthly paradise at the end of Dante's vision of purgatory.

To authenticate his interior life, Pound uses periplum, turning to his physical environment, which—it comes as no surprise—encroaches powerfully on the poem. In his chapter "The Cage" from The Pound Era Hugh Kenner emphasizes how the DTC setting grounds many of the bold, protean motifs of the Pisan Cantos. Kenner's description is racially evasive, but it remains apt to framing a view, however limited, of how the Pisan Cantos relate to their setting:

> The Detention Training Center, Mediterrenean Theater of Operations, United States Army, lay north of Pisa on the coastal plain, near the village of Metato, by the Via Aurelia which for 17 centuries has run along the sea from the Palantine Gate through Pisa, Viareggio, Carrara, Rapallo, Genoa, all the way to Arles. White oxen now shared the Aurelian Way with jeeps, and down a side road past the camp moved more traffic than the road builders had envisaged, raising slow clouds of dry dust. A half mile square of barbed wire enclosed the place; birds settled on the strands, [Pound] was to observe, like notes of a silent music. North and east stretched mountains, one cone shaped above delicate trees (he named it Taishan, for China's sacred peak), two to the left of it low and

> hemispherical (he named them the Breasts of Helen). Pisa lay south; peering through dangling laundry on clear days one could see the Tower. Sun and moon rose over the mountains, set over the invisible sea. Lizards basked in the heat; grass clung to friable earth; one could watch a wasp building her nest, or ants marching or crickets singing, or men at the obstacle Fence working out the 14-hour days and looking uncommonly like figures at the grape arbor in the Schifanoia frescoes in Ferrara. (Pound Era 471)

The great benefit of this passage is that one can readily see how at hand many of the scenes and motifs of the sequence were for the poet. Brother wasp, the lone ant, the breasts of Helen, Pisa's Leaning Tower, Taishan, the birds in musical form, the exercising soldiers—each of these is integral to the shape of the sequence's transformations: the lone ant comes to stand for the poet, the breasts of Helen become those of Amy Lowell, the Tower soon recalls Yeats, and so forth.

Yet Kenner leaves unmentioned the DTC's unique racial composition. Although the frescoes to which Pound refers depict European men at work in vineyards, the scene Pound witnessed was populated by African-American men. These men were not merely, as Kenner writes, "working out" but rather working off: "Conceived (like Dante's Purgatory) as a 'reprogramming' or 'rehabilitation' facility, the DTC offered its 'trainees' the opportunity of working off their full sentences by enduring fourteen hours a day of harshly regimented tasks and forced drills" (Sieburth xiii). Just as, in Dante, all of Purgatory is put on notice at Statius' salvation, so in the DTC: "[after] an appropriate period of [penance,] prisoners were awarded clemency and, in a weekly Saturday

ceremony on the parade grounds, 'graduated' as full-fledged privates" (Sieburth xiii). Kenner portrays many of the antique conditions offered to the poem by the setting as undergoing modernization: oxen, the sea and Roman roads, but also military traffic and barbed wire. Among the most interesting modernizations deals with the Dantescan purgation of the guilty. In this modernist version these guilty are not the classical and contemporary figures of Italy and Greece, nor the slumming and suffering white working- and middle-class of, for instance, Eliot's The Waste Land. Pound, for reasons that are less obvious than we may suppose, portrays the penitential souls of his purgatory as black American soldiers. These suffering black American souls are a new presence in the Cantos, and of a piece with the Pisan section's suddenly personal tone.

In *Pisan Cantos*, modern chiaroscuran imagery converts into images of racial phenotype. Whenever its date of composition, the proem changes the sequence not by expressing fascistic regret, but by altering the manner of transition from the Italian Diptych into *Pisan Cantos*: "To build the city of Dioce whose terraces are the color of stars" (74.11). Whatever this city may be—a metaphysical counterpart of the fascist empire, an allusion to an actual ancient city of phenomenally aesthetic symmetry, a visionary projection of Pound's poetic ambition—it mimics the stars in being not just lambent but chromatically white. The sequence remains poised for chiaroscuran imagery, but the proem radically changes the character of it. Whiteness now sublimates the failure of fascism, into the form of a visionary city.

Without the proem, a similar color scheme remains, but the fascist connotations are suggestive rather than explicit. The suggestion of fascism, delivered in the mode of

regret, foreshadows the motif of Pound's personal recovery in the sequence and through composing it:

> The suave eyes, quiet, not scornful.
>
> Rain is also of the process.
>
> What you depart from is not the way
>
> and olive tree blown white in the wind
>
> washed in the Kiang and Han
>
> what whiteness will you add to this whiteness,
>
> what candor?
>
> "the great periplum brings in the stars to our shore." (74.12-19)

Significantly, these lines center the poem on Pound himself, the eyes a pun on "I." It is instructive to pair this with the close of Canto 73, the second of the Italian Diptych:

> Nel settentrion rinasce la patria,
>
> Ma che ragazza!
>
> che ragazze,
>
> che ragazzi,
>
> portan' il nero! (73.107-111)
>
> (In the north the fatherland is born again,
>
> But what a young woman!
>
> what young women,
>
> what young men,
>
> wear the black!)

The ultimate word of the Diptych is “il nero,” or black, a reference to the staple of fascist fashion: “la comicia nera.” In this context the fascistic “black” is also heroic by intention, ending the Diptych on a note of martyrdom. Without the proem “il nero” would immediately have been paired with the “white” of both the eye and the wind in the opening scheme of *Pisan Cantos*. “Il nero” would, then, have been mediated only by the olive tree, a symbol both chromatic and iconic, instead of the elegizing mediation of the “tragedy of the dream” (74.1), which instantly sets the tenor of transition to fascist registers. Sans proem, whiteness enters the poem connoting resignation, a contemplation of duty and natural process asserted in explicitly Confucian terms; most importantly, in this poem affirming Pound’s personal identity, whiteness at this stage in the sequence connotes Pound himself. Without the proem, the defeat of fascism would have received indirect treatment as implied possibility of *scornfulness* and the lassitude of rain: Pound himself would have been the first line. The alternate suggestions of the proem seep into the sequence proper and these blur important features, which read differently otherwise.

Wagadu and Ecbatan

As Bush observes, there are in *Pisan Cantos* “conflicting authorial signals” (170). These signals are frustrating since few works so exemplify Pound’s statement of method in *Guide to Kulchur*: “the purpose of the writing is to reveal the subject” (51). After a careful reading of the origins of several major directions for these signals, Bush resolves their aporia with the following statement: “[It] is the premeditated exercise of [remembering,] it seems to me, rather than the inspired response to the landscape that assures these cantos a places on our shelves” (196). To appreciate the achievement of

Pisan Cantos is, then, to appreciate its mnemonics, associated by Bush with the passages of eloquent abstraction and resistance to loss of memory/personality. I side with Bush on the chronology of the sequence but depart from his attempt to bifurcate the sequence between the insignificant contours of a landscape immediately at hand, periplum, and the ambitious achievement of Pound's memorial intentions, mnemonics. Like the two faces of the god Janus, the one aspect of the sequence is not so easily separated from the other, and hence the lasting power of *Pisan Cantos* lies in both. This claim is particularly noteworthy if we recognize Pound's resistance to loss of personality as necessarily entailing clinging to racial self-awareness because this awareness is given concrete embodiment in periplum, which embodies, in turn, the abstractions in mnemonic passages. Therefore, Pound's turn to the moment at hand is as memorial as inspiring, and the refrain "dove sta memoria" is as likely to occur after a remembered privileged moment as after a powerfully seen present one, as in 76:

> And the sun high over horizon hidden in cloud bank
>
> lit saffron the cloud ridge
>
> dove sta memora (76.1-3)

Here, the image of clouds—backlit, fringed with saffron, and graduated with light and shadow—moves Pound. The vivid periplum is a springboard for the poet into mnemonics, not a respite from it.

As a representative modernist lynching figure, Till's presence is a catalyst converting the modernist chiaroscuran imagery into racial phenotype, and structures the sequence's theme of retained personal identity around a reification of racial difference as well. The black soldiers, then, are far from incidentally present in the sequence. Rather

they extend the force of Pound's reification of self into a vital current of *Pisan Cantos*, grounding Pound's selfhood in antithesis to the lynched body of Till and further sealing the contiguity of this modernist lynching figure with Eliot's modernist Hanged Man: Till is an antithetical metonym for Pound and through him for the sequence itself, insofar as the sequence dramatizes this reconstituted racial awareness.

To again take up the issue of the proem, we can see how the initially subtle chiaroscuro becomes more pronounced and racialized. The visionary city of Dioce is typically read as morphing into various equivalent entities throughout the Pisan Cantos. Indeed, Carroll Terrell and Leon Surrette pick up on Pound's return to an earlier motif of the full work: "The camel drivers sit in the turn of the stairs, / Look down on Ecbatan of plotted streets" (4.100-101). As Leon Surrette explains—following Herodotus's *Histories*—Ecbatan is an ancient planned city designed by Deioces so as to have "the balance and perfection of a work of art" (180); it is an historical precursor of sorts to such planned modern cities as St. Petersburg, Brasilia, or Washington, D.C. In *Pisan Cantos*, this theme of Ecbatan represents the aesthetically rather than politically ideal social order, and in its correspondence to Wagadu becomes a way-station for the conversion of chromatics into racial phenotype through the force of Till's hanging body.

As Leo Frobenius and Douglas C. Fox propose in African Genesis, Wagadu is a city spoken of in the folklore of the Soninke tribe of West Africa: lost four times it will emerge a fifth time and be eternal. In the wake of the proem, the loss of Wagadu like the lack of Ecbatan seems a trope for fascist failure. Yet, if we restrict the extent to which the city of Deioces determines our reading of Wagadu, the opposition has a chiaroscuran as well as political element: the white city of "stars" and "black" city of the Soninke. In

this comparison, the relatively straightforward chromatics of, for instance, the "olive tree blown white in the wind" (74.15) take a detour through race. To claim that a literally white city can be juxtaposed to a city of blacks is an irony so quotidian as to be unremarkable, though it helps that in its initial appearance the Persian Ecbatan is a setting for Greek myth, and thus racially and culturally "whiter." In *Pisan Cantos*, this racialized chiaroscuro is a self-conscious principle of organization.

The "race" of Wagadu is reinforced structurally by the proximity of passages illustrating DTC life impinging on the poem. Wagadu appears early in Canto 74, but anonymously:

> Lute of Gassir. Hoooo Fasa
> came a lion-coloured pup bringing fleas
> and a bird with white markings, a stepper (74.93-95)

The lute of Gassir is, according to African Genesis, the source of vanity that compelled Gassir to lead his sons to slaughter and, consequently, to be rejected by the social order of Wagadu: they are a city at war, and he is their greatest warrior and heir-apparent; hence, this rejection ensures the first destruction. A few lines further on, allusion to Wagadu recurs in the following passage:

> 4 giants at the 4 corners
> three young men at the door
> and they digged a ditch round about me
> lest the damp gnaw thru my bones (74.146-149)

This allusion revises Wagadu's description in the Frobenius and Fox volume. There is no mention of giants in African Genesis, but the four serves both a numerological and anamneutic role in the tale:

> Four times Wagadu stood there in all her splendour. Four times Wagadu disappeared and was lost to human [sight.] Four times Wagadu changed her [name.] Four times she turned her [face.] For Wagadu, whenever men have seen her, has always had four gates. (Frobenius 97)

The second mention of Wagadu refers to the DTC. The four giants in this case are the armed snipers who shot any potential escapees (Pound is clearly taking poetic license here: at the DTC there were actually fourteen guard towers). The stark conflict of authorial signals is clear: on the one hand Wagadu is Ecbatan and, on the other, Wagadu is the DTC. The proem enhances this difficulty, as does Wagadu's third appearance in 74:

> 4 times the city was rebuilded, Hooo Fasa
>
> Gassir, Hooo Fasa dell' Italia tradita
>
> now in the mind indestructible, Gassir, Hoooo Fasa,
>
> with giants at the four corners
>
> and four gates mid-wall Hooo Fasa
>
> and a terrace the colour of stars
>
> pale as the dawn cloud, la luna
>
> thin as Demeter's hair
>
> Hooo Fasa, and in a dance the renewal
>
> with two larks in contrappunto

at sunset

ch'intenerisce

a sinistra la Torre

seen thru a pair of breeches. (74.197-210)

Here Wagadu assumes some of the symbolic weight of Dioce. Now it, too, has a "a terrace the colour of stars," and the chant of the griot/poet includes the aside: "dell' Italia tradita" ["of Italy betrayed"]. though Pound clearly means Mussolini, not Italy. Sieburth rightly suggests that here Wagadu's "reconstruction in the future rhymes with Pound's eschatological dream of [Dioce]" (123). The future Wagadu which "every man [will have in] his heart and every woman [in] her womb," it seems, will be a white city.

Carroll Terrell identifies the "pup" in the lines after the first allusion to Wagadu as a stray in the prison camp. The "stepper" accompanying it is apparently one of the many birds in the sequence. Terrell does not note the parallel appearance of this sequence of animals in the admired libretto of *Pisan Cantos*:

Thou art a beaten dog beneath the hail,

A swollen magpie in a fitful sun,

Half black half white (81.155-157)

These lines, as Baciagalupo astutely observes, mimic and revise lines from Villon's "Ballade des Pendus" (94), a poem in the voice of hanged bodies. The sequence of the imagery is important, too; in particular, the negative impact of the final quoted line is worth noting: the magpie's coloring emphasizes suffering, and indirectly registers

Pound's supremacist aversion to miscegenation,[25] even as he turns to Till's hanging body as a racial indicator. Given its role behind the modernist lynching figure outside the protest tradition, Pound's view of the relationship between blacks and whites in the United States is instructive. Pound's explanatory "Note to the Base Censor" gives some clue of Pound's sense of race in the U.S.:

> The proper names given are mostly those of men on sick call seen passing my tent. A very brief allusion to further study in names, that is, I am interested to note the prevalence of early American names, either of whites of the old tradition (most of the early presidents for example) or of descendents of slaves who took the names of their masters. Interesting in contrast to the relative scarcity of melting-pot names. (Captivity 177)

Beyond Louis Till's role, the further gesture of indexing the soldiers, for Pound, asserts American cultural heritage insofar as it is built on the homogeneity implied by consanguinity of races. Sieburth reads this view as part of Pound's deep allegiance to the tradition of white American paternalism, as well as a hint of Pound's manic anti-Semitism:

> [Whereas] melting-pot names bear witness to the mongrelized and urbanized (and, for Pound, ultimately Judaized) immigrant history of the United States, the African-American proper names in the poem function as patriotic gestures toward the onomastic memory of a purer rural America. (xxi)

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[25] In the chapter "Ezra Pound: Anti-Semiticism, Segregationism, and the 'Arsenal of Live Thought'" from his study Terrorism and Modern Literature, Alex Houen documents what little is known of Pound's exchange with segregationist John Kaspar, which is very little. Pound writes at one point: "Nothing is more damnably harmful to everyone, black and white than [miscegenation], bastardization and mongrelization of EVERYthing" (180).

The soldiers' names—black and white, but especially black—are for Pound, a way to acknowledge an idyllic sense of U.S. cultural heritage. In one of his radio broadcasts, "As a Beginning," Pound suggests that this cultural history arises from the days of "age old common sense concerning the homestead" (*Speaking* 152), and goes on to describe the origins of this "common sense":

> Class war is NOT an American product, not from the ROOTS of the nation. Not in our historical process. And the RACIAL solution, which is Europe's solution, which is IN Europe's process, rooted deep down, unuprootable. What about that? You have got to, or you someday will have to study the American or United states historical process. Colonies pretty much racially homogenous: evolved. (*Speaking* 153)

Pound's scandalous idealization of early America implies that issues of race and of class are what Pound offensively calls "imported exotic[s]" (*Speaking* 153). This idealization of an originary homogeneity undergirds Pound's racist paternalism. In a radio broadcast entitled "Violence," Pound asks his listeners "whether the American colonial race shall survive" (*Speaking* 173). In a follow-up broadcast soon after, Pound clarifies what he means by "American colonial race":

> I might say, in historic flashback, that the difference between the American Revolution of 1776 and the French terror following 1789 lay largely in Mr. Adams', Mr. Jefferson's and General Washington's race. OUR American revolution was an Anglo-Scottish revolution and the French revolution was not (*Speaking* 176)

This notion of race as ethnic heritage is notably bebunked by cultural historian Jacques Barzun as "the aegis of a sincere fanaticism" (2). Pound uses this notion finally to explain his sense of the cultural significance of racial consanguity:

> Pacts may be signed between the Pennsylvania Deitsch and the scrawny New Englander of British or Anglo-Scotch origin, but on no basis save that of race, and of allied more or less consanguineous races can you cohere. (*Speaking* 188)

Ironically for a poet so vehemently opposed to miscegenation, this consanguinity extends to black Americans: indeed, the consanguity is a tortured shadow of U.S. history, the vexed legacy of slavery. Although it is difficult to see these names as conveying anything other than historical evidence of an America already vastly miscegenated in its origins, this final contradiction enables Pound to revive his racial awareness in *Pisan Cantos* by confronting Louis Till's hanging body, which though black and male seemed a version of Pound's own.

Zeus Ram and The Caged Panther

> Under *les six potences*
>
> Absouldre, que tous nous vueil absouldre
>
> Lay there Barabbas and two thieves lay beside him
>
> Infantile synthesis in Barabbas
>
> Minus Hemingway, minus Antheil, ebullient
>
> And by name Thos. Wilson
>
> Mr. K. said nothing foolish, the whole month nothing fool:

"if we weren't dumb, we wouldn't be here"

And the Lane Gang. (74.97-104)

These lines, besides following up on Wagadu, also elaborate on Pound's statement of circumstance: "sinceritas / from the death cells in sight of Mt. Taishan @ Pisa" (74.77-78). A barb at Christological symbolism in poetry, line 99 ["Infantile synthesis in Barabbas"] is another instance of Pound's self-reference, indicating his own sense (or hope) of being spared. The use of Barabbas as a stand-in for Pound leads Pound into strange subtraction: "minus Hemingway, minus Antheil." The "minus" here unravels the Barabbas image. In making the subtracted figures ones from his own past, Pound doubly asserts his centrality to the passage. It is notable that this unraveling is mneumonic, and not of the periplum. These figures of memory, though, lead immediately to figures of the present, figures of the DTC: Thos. [Thomas] Wilson, Mr K., and the Lane Gang. In the second allusion to Wagadu, the move to the periplum is yet more pronounced: the three young men digging a drainage ditch for Pound are more instances of figures of the present.

Unraveling the image of Barabbas deepens the affect of the passage in which Pound notes Louis Till's execution. The phrase: "minus Hemingway, minus Antheil" is a bridge between Barabbas-Pound and the DTC detainees. It repeats the chiaroscuran structuring I have already outlined. A reversal of this turn happens in the second half of the passage involving Louis Till: "plus Cholkis / plus mythology, thought he was Zeus ram or another one" (74.72-73). The mythology is expectedly Greek. Pound obliquely refers to the fairly well known story of the Golden Fleece, Cholkis being the King who possessed the Fleece. Pound had turned to this myth before; in the sixth section of

"Moeurs Contemporaines" he writes of a man "quenched as the brand of Meleagar" (VI.72) after a sexual orgy. In *Pisan Cantos*, the sexual references—contextually Greek—tend toward intimacy, even domesticity: these passages are lyrical and seemingly biographical, being possible re-enactments of powerful moments in Pound's own experience. There is, for instance, the passage in 76 recounting the conception of Aeneas that may be an actual erotic memory, perhaps the conception of Pound's own son (76.144-150). Also, the "new subtlety of eyes" (81.118) in the libretto has been suggested as a trope for the visitation of Pound's wife. The treatment of Louis Till is thematically similar to those closest to Pound, though the sexual elements exchange intimacy for violence: "the crystal body / the tangent formed in the hand's cup" (76.147-148) is instead "murder and rape with trimmings" (74.172). The similarity in treatment is further evidence of Pound's paternalism, but also points to a final level of Pound's strategy of identification through a modernist lynching figure.

For were a run-of-the-mill racism behind *Pisan Cantos*, we might expect Till's association with the mythical Golden Fleece to suggest Till's bestial nature. Yet when Pound invokes animal imagery it is not, then, always to affront humanness. In context, the animal imagery indicates humanness institutionally reduced to beasthood:

"all them g.d. m.f. generals c.s. all of 'em fascists"
"fer a bag o' Dukes"
"the things I saye an' dooo"
ac ego in harum
so lay men in Circe's swine-sty;
ivi in harum *ego* ac vidi cadaveres animae

"c'mon small fry" sd/ the little coon to the big black;

of the slaver as seen between decks

and all the presidents

Washington Adams Monroe Polk Tyler

Plus Carrol (of Carrolton) Crawford (74.400-410)

In this passage Pound sets up a tripartite connection, linking the dehumanizing transformation of Odysseus's men into hogs by the witch Circe; the dehumanizing conditions of the Middle Passage; and the language and behavior of the black soldiers to the names of the black soldiers which are also names of Presidents. Later in the same canto, Pound invokes animals, observing life in the prison camp. The move from mneumonics to periplum is pronounced as Pound moves from memories of Magdalen College to the DTC:

and there was no doubt that the dons lived well

in the kawledg

it was if I remember rightly the burn and freeze that the freshmen

had failed to follow

or else a mere desire to titter etc.

and it is (in parenthesis) doubtless

easier to teach them to roar like gorillas

than to scan φαινεται μοι

inferior gorillas

of course, lacking the wind sack

and although Siki was quite observable

we have not yet calculated the sum gorilla+bayonet

(74.693-705)

Pound invokes a gorilla to symbolize the soldiers of the DTC, likening the familiar choral yell of the soldiers to the roar of gorillas. The image is also pedagogical, the roar is the chant of students drilled in Greek. But what are soldiers learning? The phrase "inferior gorillas" is pointed, not derogatory. Pound is being literal: these soldiers are not good gorillas, but the U.S. could care less because its aim is to train them into thoughtless violence. The scholastic discipline of Magdalen College is contrasted to the military discipline of the DTC, which elsewhere Pound likens to slavery: "amid the slaves learning slavery" (74.222) and later "Knecht gegen Knecht/ to the sound of the bumm drum" (76. 330-331), where commentators translate the German as "slave against slave."

In both passages, the debased humanity of the black soldiers is situational. The result, Pound suggests, of what they are made to learn, and not their character nor a consequence of racial descent. In a strange way *Pisan Cantos* is in fact incompatible with the social perceptions informing lynching. The situational debasement of humanity that Pound connects throughout the sequence to the Middle Passage climaxes in Canto 83: "No man who has passed a month in the death cells / believes in cages for beasts" (83.67-68). Since Pound experienced just such a month, we can suppose Pound, though outside the protest tradition, writes *Pisan Cantos* as a protest of the DTC.

Pound's self-reference in animal imagery adds further perspective: "But in the caged panther's eyes: / 'Nothing. Nothing that you can do. . .'" (83.60-61). These lines continue a passage in Canto 82: "but that a man should live in that further terror, and live / the loneliness of death came upon me" (82.126-127). "That further terror" is probably

the sentence of death under which those imprisoned in the death cells like Pound lived. The existential loneliness of death is also the physical counterpart to the physical loneliness of the cage, which in varying scales existed in the DTC.

This animal imagery, then, stands for human vitality constrained (Pound as "the caged panther") or wasted (imprisoned black soldiers as Circe's helpless swine or thoughtless, armed gorillas). This use explicitly raises the issue of the physical conditions of captive enslavement, and suggests that these conditions are extended at the DTC. Since Pound, too, is imprisoned there, he identifies these conditions as his own, and writes this sequence as a partial record of the consequences of this realization for his experience. Pragmatically, this use of imagery caps the meaning of the sequence's modernist lynching figure.

The scapegoat is a longstanding, powerful symbol of vitality consecrated through violence, and though I have gestured toward Pound's abjurance of Christian symbolism there is, of course, a strong pagan and ceremonial element in the sequence exemplified especially in the refrain: "aram nemus vult," or the grove needs an altar. This altar is various things in the sequence: a place of mythological, historical, economic, political, and racial communion. Perhaps, the grove, too, is yet another stand-in for the fascist state. Yet, insofar as this altar is *needed* it is one of the final stands of the international modernist motif of the cycle of sacrifice and redemption. Louis Till is associated with the Golden Fleece as an icon of sacrifice that vivifies Pound's vitality. In *Pisan Cantos*, Till becomes a modernist lynching figure of racial awareness inspiring Pound's recovery of racial awareness, and reifying the representation of lynching as a significant feature of U.S. modernist poetry.

Conclusion: Dawnbreaking

Robert Hayden's lynching figure moves beyond the modernist era with his figure, Dawnbreaker, and the eponymous poem expresses the transformative end of *communitas*. Hayden's title recalls a lyric by Arna Bontemps entitled "Day-Breakers," which ends with the poem's collective voice "[b]eating a way for the rising sun" (6). Hayden's poem takes up the eidetic theme of sunrise and of social hope, disturbing Bontemps's vigorous positivity to the startling purpose of invoking lynching:

Ablaze
with candles sconced
in weeping eyes
of wounds,

He danced
Through jeering streets
To death;

(1-7)

Hayden's sun suggests the permanent imaginative importance of lynching to both U.S. society and U.S. poetry. The image extends Countee Cullen's eidetic Christology of lynching, but Hayden's sun has a pagan quality—iconically mutilated and on fire, this figure of the sun foregrounds the primordial violence I have argued the term "lynching" symbolizes. One emphasis of this study is my position that the word "lynching" before it was racist violence was violence that obsessively preserved social conformity: through

spilling the blood of the nonconformist, it emphasized conformity as the ultimate good for political and national well-being. Modernist protest differs from previous modes of protest in U.S. poetry. Its protest evolves by matching the conditions of its historical moment, and moves away from appeals to social identity. Modernist lynching figures embody politically charged emotional identifications.

The light of sunrise issues from the nonconformist, a lynched man whose sources of light are fiery candles stuck in his wounds, which are also eyes (recalling the Greek mythological figure Argus). The gradual intensity of morning twilight among buildings is this man's run among a lynching mob, or, as Hayden sees it, the “jeering streets” of Christ's passion. Yet, this lynched man is also setting the crowd aflame as he runs among it. The outrageous image of the burning mob is also uncanny because the voice of the poem becomes the voice of this crowd: (“fires that consume / us now” [14-15]). The voice of the burning crowd is the voice of *communitas*, a voice risking the break from social structure into social anti-structure. The anti-structure competes in order to replace the older social structures, as society reintegrates *communitas* into the fabric of community. Hayden does not so much protest in "Dawnbreaker" as imagine the renewing purposes of protest, the vision of a community changed by lynching’s fires.

In Heidegger's sense, this study destructs received opinion in modern and contemporary poetics: by observing how the tortured shadows cast by fires of lynchings reach into the very heart of U.S. modernism, a crucial outpost in what Pascale Casanova calls the world republic of letters. These tortured shadows reach deeply, and inspire poets both to protest these tortures and to write in resistance to the fanatical social conformity that accommodates these tortures (and that perpetuates them). The patterns

cast by the tortured shadows of lynchings falling over U.S. poetry have gone largely unnoticed, and this study has sustained a critical (if largely indirect) polemic against existing discussions of lynching and literature and also against discussions in poetics predicated on social and political fracturing. The aim of the first polemic is acknowledging the capacity to protest as an affirmation of poetry's claim to agency and dynamism—such literature may write against the times and so precisely resist embodying ideological norms. (The fate of major Eastern European poets under the regimes of twentieth-century communism charts the significance of this agency and dynamism of literature when these are in conflict with the State.[26]) In order for literature to protest, it must be able to offer perspectives and persuade readers into patterns of thought and action that depart from accepted social practice. This incitement to depart from social practice must remain timely to be effective, and so this study has tied protest in traditions of poetry to decades—in literature, protest is directed to the period in which it is written because protest is an expression of immediacy, of contemporary urgency. Protesting lynching in the era of lynching then requires strategies dependent on the moment.

This dependence on the immediate historical moment sets protest literature at seeming odds to non-protest literature. After all, literature outside the protest tradition is generally regarded under rubrics of timelessness, universality and personal delectation. As a fine art, poetic texts are typically supposed to be fundamentally outside history. Yet I have shown that the resources of protest are found among both protest and non-protest poetry. This integral relationship of one mode to the other means that though protest is of a historical period, it is not different in kind, only degree, from non-protest literature.

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[26] See Albert French on poetry and politics in the Czech Republic.

The consequence for poetics is that neither conventional groupings of poets nor "commonsensical" ways of critical discussion do much to illuminate the strong exchange between protest and non-protest traditions. In poetics, conventional groupings of poets may fail in showing the full range of influences and variety at work in given traditions of literary writing. Similarly, commonsensical modes of critical discussion—discussions that rely too heavily on the given-ness of the significance of social categories to the study of literature—in some cases risk trivializing the complexity of these very categories, especially in poetry. The fluid exchange in resources between protest and non-protest writing points also to the panoply in the poetic traditions contributing to each—in the case of lynching, New Negro and New Jewish writers, Euro-modernists, socialists.

This study has shown that during the period of modernism in the U.S., modernist lynching figures are embedded in the practice of poetry. Major lines of protest in modernist poetry constitute ideological resistance to lynching, and these lines of poetry extend back to Frances E. W. Harper's turn to the protest of lynching in the 1890's. From Harper, these traditions of protest variegate into the multi-ethnic range of protest work I have pointed out. A difference, however, constitutes protest work in the 1920's and beyond. This difference is the modernist lynching figure, and this modernist lynching figure appears in both protest and non-protest work. This study has shown how a figure that appears in the non-protest work of T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens is structurally similar to the defining protest figure in the twenties and thirties of such writers as Angelina Weld Grimké, Jean Toomer, James Weldon Johnson, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, and Helene Johnson. This structural similarity resembles influence when Ezra Pound writes *Pisan Cantos*. In Pound's sequence, the modernist lynching figure of the

non-protest tradition embodies a protest of the conditions of Pound's political imprisonment. The unconventional set of poets I have set forth in this study reveals an important topos of the modernist period that would be otherwise difficult to construe, if not invisible. The very purpose of this study gets highlighted in identifying this topos—the risk of talking about (and so seeing) modern and contemporary poetics and lynching in new ways.

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