

Not Only War is Hell: World War I and African American Lynching Narratives

When Wilbur Little, an African American soldier, returned to Blakely, Georgia from service in World War I, a group of white men met him at the train station and forced him to strip off his uniform. A few days later he defied their warning not to wear the uniform again in public, and a mob lynched him (Dray 248). His lynching sent the message to all African American soldiers returning from the war that their sacrifices for the cause of liberty in Europe would not lead to racial equality in America. A number of literary texts by African American writers published between 1919 and the 1930s, however, inverted that message by invoking the trope of the lynched soldier to make the case for civil rights. Carrie Williams Clifford's poem "The Black Draftee from Georgia" (1922), for example, alludes to the lynching of Wilbur Little:

What though the hero-warrior was black?
His heart was white and loyal to the core;
And when to his loved Dixie he came back,
Maimed, in the duty done on foreign shore,
Where from the hell of war he never flinched,
Because he cried, "Democracy," was lynched. (219)

After World War I racial tensions in the United States became severely strained. The massive migration of southern African Americans to northern cities, the widespread emergence of segregation in the North, the regeneration of the Ku Klux Klan, race riots in several cities, and a new wave of lynchings in the South all contributed to a sense of racial unrest. At the same time, new works of literature by African American writers—the movement known as the New Negro Renaissance or the Harlem Renaissance—projected an image of defiant racial identity. In this social and artistic context, African American writers invoked the trope of the African American soldier, the person who incontrovertibly deserves equal citizenship, in juxtaposition with images of lynching, the radical denial of human rights, to make a case for civil rights. This juxtaposition leads to an aesthetic of lynching images that pushes a progressive agenda, fusing the artistic and social ends of the New Negro movement and demonstrating literature's value as a weapon in the struggle for racial equality.

Lynching is deeply embedded in America's racial psyche. Grace Hale explains that by the beginning of the twentieth century "white southerners transformed a deadly and often quiet form of vigilante 'justice' into a modern spectacle of enduring power" (201). The lynching spectacle exiated the specter of blackness from the white community while affirming the purity of the white race. Often targeted at the mythical "black beast rapist" who personified white fears of black hypersexual animalism, the orgy of violence established the social primacy of the white race and, as Joel Williamson contends, unified the white community (124). By the time of World War I, lynchings had developed into a programmatic ritual of torture and murder.¹ This ritual, Trudier Harris argues in *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (1984), is essential to preserving white supremacy. Any subversive action, real or imagined, on the part of black subjects constitutes an act of evil,

defined as a transgression against the white hegemony. "In order to exorcise the evil and restore the topsy-turvy world to its rightful position," Harris argues, "the violator must be punished. . . . Symbolic punishment becomes communal because the entire society has been threatened; thus the entire society must act to put down the violator of the taboo" (12). On the eve of World War I, the film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) made the lynching spectacle a national event, unifying the country along the color line and translating the lynching ritual into a narrative of regional reconciliation through racial solidarity.²

Not coincidentally, World War I greatly increased racial antagonism in the United States. Labor shortages in essential industries spurred a massive movement of African American southerners into northern cities, effectively exporting the color line to the North. The popular success of *The Birth of a Nation*, meanwhile, prompted a revival of the Ku Klux Klan and a surge in racial violence. Racial tension in the country placed the U. S. War Department in a precarious position. The army required the services of African American laborers to mount the mobilization effort, but civil rights leaders, including Joel Spingarn and W. E. B. Du Bois of the NAACP, insisted that African Americans in the military receive at least a relative degree of equal treatment. Initially, Du Bois demanded the complete integration of the U. S. Army, but, considering the racial tenor of the United States at the time, a move that drastic would not be possible. The War Department did offer modest concessions, including the formation of segregated combat units, a segregated officers' training camp at Ft. Des Moines, and an integrated conscription process. But African American soldiers continued to suffer as many indignities as did African American civilians, and, following a race riot in Houston in 1917, the War Department vacated most of its concessions. The vast majority of African American soldiers were assigned to the service of supply—labor battalions modeled after Southern chain gangs—with the exception of two combat units, the 93rd Division, a National Guard unit that fought under French command, and the 92nd Division, a unit of African American draftees that fought under American command.³

As the soldiers returned from Europe, racial tensions that had been sublimated to sustain the war effort erupted. During the "red summer" of 1919, race riots took place in Chicago, Washington, and Elaine, Arkansas. In each of these cases many African Americans were killed and beaten, but in each case African Americans fought back, demonstrating a new militancy that challenged the established racial dialectic.⁴ Describing the New Negro Movement—the radical political movement for civil rights following World War I—Nell Irvin Painter asserts that "the senseless carnage of the First World War dealt white supremacy a tremendous blow" by demonstrating to African American Americans that liberty and democracy were causes worth personal and collective sacrifice (132). Postwar African American militancy inspired new forms of social protest, both aesthetic and political. Alain Locke's collection *The New Negro* (1925) and many other texts produced during the Harlem Renaissance demonstrate the urge of African American intellectuals to use literature as a means to secure social equality. At the same time the NAACP lobbied aggressively for the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, the first major item of legislation protecting the rights of African Americans since the end of Reconstruction.⁵ Although the bill failed, it initiated an open discussion about the nature of lynching, forcing white supremacists to defend the practice as African American civil rights leaders and sympathetic white politicians and philanthropists attacked it.

In the years following World War I images of lynching appeared frequently in African American literature, intentionally blurring the porous boundary between the aesthetic and the political. Literary critics have noticed that representations of lynching usually have deliberate social implications. In *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912* (1996), Sandra Gunning examines the "opposing discourse" of turn-of-the-century black and white writers, including

Thomas Dixon, Ida B. Wells, Charles Chesnutt, and Kate Chopin, “to suggest a more subtle way of reading the ‘progressivism’ always ascribed to or hoped for in writing by people of color, when compared to ‘mainstream’ white literary history” (12). Trudier Harris argues in *Exorcising Blackness* that depictions of lynching by African American writers contribute to “racial memory.” In literary texts, she writes, “the [lynching] ritual becomes an ‘expected’ way in which the black writer can show white attitudes towards Blacks from historical and cultural points of view and one of the easiest way in which readers, particularly black readers, can be urged to identify with what those attitudes have meant in terms of destruction for Blacks” (70). Literary representations of the lynching ritual thus have a unifying effect on the African American community similar to the unifying effect of the actual lynching ritual on the white community. Judith L. Stephens’s essay “Racial Violence and Representation: Performance Strategies in Lynching Dramas of the 1920s” analyzes the intersection of the literary lynching ritual and the dramatic genre in several plays that demonstrate the social agenda of African American community theater, which was in effect to protest lynching by portraying lynching.⁶

Across the genres, the figure of the African American soldier became a powerful signifier in the literary campaign against lynching. Franny Nudelman suggests in *John Brown’s Body: Slavery, Violence, and the Culture of War* (2004) that images of African American soldiers in Union uniforms during the Civil War symbolized “the nation’s own rededication to the cause of equality” (151). In the years after that war, however, most advances toward equality had been effectively eroded, and by the beginning of World War I black lives were largely defined by white construction. But after the war the image of the African American soldier in the uniform of the United States gained new currency. In *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1995), George Hutchinson writes that “the African American modernists . . . repeated references to ‘unknown soldiers’ who turned out to be black, to ‘brotherhood’ of black and white recognized only in the face of death on European battlefields . . . and to lynching not only as a crime but as a peculiarly American crime, all reflect the extent to which the Harlem Renaissance (and not just in its canonical texts) was caught up in a struggle over the meaning and possession of ‘America’ ” (15). A military uniform on the body of an African American person symbolized the moral and ethical necessity of social equality, so literary representations of the African American soldier constituted acts of creative dissent on the part of African American writers. As Mark Whalen explains, “the figure of the African American soldier returning from the Great War retained a powerful range of political connections in the imaginations of both black and white Americans, long after the immediate social consequences of demobilization” (776).

Alice Dunbar-Nelson saw the war itself as a means to ending racial violence. She actively supported America’s involvement in the war and worked in several capacities to encourage African Americans to support the war effort, including organizing a massive Flag Day celebration in 1918 that attracted more than six thousand African American participants and raising funds for war relief.⁷ She may, in fact, have been the most prominent African American female proponent of America’s involvement in the war. After the war, she contributed a chapter on “Negro Women in War Work” to Emmett J. Scott’s *Official History of the American Negro in the World War* (1919).⁸ Her best-known poem, “I Sit and Sew,” addresses the war from the perspective of a woman “yearning only to go / There in that holocaust of hell, those fields of woe” but who feels stifled by her womanly duties (84). Since she could not go to those fields of woe herself, Dunbar-Nelson wrote a propagandistic play, *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918), to encourage African American men to enlist in the Army. Published in *The Crisis*, the play makes an implicit case for military service as a means to achieving equality and ending the spectacle of racial violence. Clare Tylee makes the point that “*Mine Eyes Have Seen* debates the argument that a right to

national citizenship is established by fighting for the nation and assumes the concomitant view that citizenship is dependent on a masculine view of self-worth based on strength and courage to do one's patriotic duty" (158).

The play takes place in a tenement in a Northern city where three siblings from the South have come to seek work and refuge. The family fled their home after their father was lynched. Since coming to the North their mother has died of pneumonia and the older brother has been injured in an industrial accident. The play focuses on the younger brother, Chris, whose draft number has been called. He reacts

Military service makes an unequivocal case for equal citizenship, so cases of African American veterans threatened with lynching, of their family members lynched in their absence, or their actual lynching expose the hypocrisy of American intervention in World War I and the arbitrary brutality of American racism.

with outrage, refusing to serve in the Army. "Must I go fight for the nation that let my father's murder go unpunished?" he asks, "That killed my mother—that took away my chances for making a man out of myself?" (242). Chris, who represents all prospective African American soldiers, asks crucial questions. A nation that allows mob violence, including gruesome ritualistic murder, clearly does not value either the social contract or the duties of civic responsibility. Therefore, many African Americans rightfully felt that they had no obligation to serve in the military, and in fact, thousands of African American men refused to serve.⁹

For precisely this reason, the War Department courted the support of influential civil rights leaders, specifically Joel Spingarn and W. E. B. Du Bois of the NAACP. Du Bois, much like Frederick Douglass during the Civil War, saw the war as an opportunity for African Americans to gain civil rights through military service. African American soldiers wearing the uniform while fighting and dying for the cause of liberty, he reasoned, would make an unassailable case for racial equality. He made his support public in the editorial "Close Ranks" in *The Crisis*:

We of the colored race have no ordinary interest in the outcome [of the war]. That which the German power represents today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and all darker races for equality, freedom and democracy. Let us not hesitate. Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy. We make no ordinary sacrifice, but we make it gladly and willingly with our eyes lifted to the hills. (697)

Dunbar-Nelson's play deliberately dramatizes Du Bois's position on African American military service.

The play presents a number of arguments in favor of military service, citing the inherent courage of African Americans and making jingoistic references to the Huns' barbarity. But the most persuasive arguments come from the other residents of the tenement building: Mrs. O'Neill, the widow of an Irish soldier killed in the war; Jake, a Jewish refugee; and Harvey, a mule-driver on furlough from the war. Collectively, these dispossessed characters urge Chris to forget his special grievance and to fight for the cause of all humanity. Then, to underscore the point, his invalid older brother makes an impassioned plea:

It is not for us to visit retribution. Nor to wish hatred on others. Let us rather remember the good that has come to us. Love of humanity is above the small considerations of time or place or race or sect. Can't you be big enough to feel pity for the little crucified French children—for the ravished Polish girls, even as their mother must have felt sorrow, if they had known, for OUR burned and maimed little ones? Oh, Mothers of Europe, we be of one blood, you and I! (247-48)

As the stirring strains of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” waft into the room, Chris relents, claiming that America is his country and that he will serve it proudly. The play’s tone seems to assume, as perhaps even Du Bois did, that African American soldiers will actually serve in combat, heroically carrying the bloody banner.¹⁰ The play’s appeal to pathos avoids the complexity of African American military service, and it makes no reference to possible outcomes of the war for African Americans, including the problems of discrimination, segregation, and lynching.¹¹

Not Only War (1932) by Victor Daly may be the most important African American novel of World War I, in part because it portrays the complexity of African American military service and the transatlantic color line, which originates in the U. S. South and extends to the metropolises of the U. S. North and to the battlefields of France. Born in New York City, Daly was a student at Cornell University when the war began. He enlisted in the Army and trained at the African American officers’ training camp at Ft. Des Moines, and he served with the 93rd Division in France, where he saw combat. He returned to Cornell after the war, graduating in 1922, and he worked as managing editor of Carter Woodson’s *Journal of Negro History* until 1934.¹² Because of his education, his military service, and his experience studying segregation, Daly understood the color line’s effects on African American soldiers, who fought for the cause of liberty for others but not for themselves.

In Daly’s novel, the war inadvertently initiates an interracial romantic triangle in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Montgomery Jason, the novel’s protagonist, is an idealistic African American Southerner.¹³ Echoing the message of Dunbar-Nelson’s play, he enlists in the army because he believes “that if we roll up our sleeves and plunge into this thing, that the Government will reward the race for its loyalty” (20). Daly contrasts Jason with the son of a prominent white family, Robert Lee Casper, who he describes as “faithful to his creed. He believed in the Baptist Church, the supremacy of the white race and the righteousness of the Democratic Party” (13). Both Jason and Casper court Miriam Pinckney, an attractive African American schoolteacher, but the nature of their romances reveals the sexual duality of the color line: white men could have sexual relationships with African American women but African American men could not have sexual relationships with white women. Pinckney, herself, comments on the inherent inequality of her relationship with Casper. “Southern white men,” she thinks, “could only seek friendship with comely colored girls for one purpose—a social equality that existed after dark” (40). White southerners, including Casper, projected hypersexual characteristics onto African American men and women, and, to a great extent, the elaborate customs and mores of the color line were designed to prevent the possibility of sexual contact between white women and African American men, primarily by demeaning and infantilizing African American men through a campaign of systematic dehumanization and spectacle lynching.

The war makes the color line more complex. Although the army is segregated, certain exigencies allow for the possibility of race mixing. After several weeks in combat, for example, Jason’s unit retires to the rear where they are billeted in the home of a Frenchwoman. Upon reaching the woman’s home, Jason learns that his racial identity precedes him. When the woman’s granddaughter asks who is at the door, the woman replies, “Un noir. . . . Un Americain” (77). “The world over,” he thinks, “a nigger first—an American afterwards” (77). The Frenchwoman, Blanche Aubertin, nevertheless welcomes him into her home. She convinces her grandmother to allow Jason and the other African American soldiers to stay with them, but her presence unnerves Jason, who has been thoroughly conditioned by the taboo on proximity to white women. Aubertin, however, is curious about him and his life in America:

Montie Jason was the first Negro, as well as the first American, that Blanche Aubertin had ever spoken to in her life . . . there were certain questions she was burning to ask him.

Montie had a great deal of difficulty in making her understand that South Carolina was just as much a part of the continental United States, as Normandy was a part of France. Then she wanted to know why he was light brown in color, and had soft, wavy, black hair, while the other sergeants were all black, with funny, crinkly hair. Montie was amused at this; but he realized that the amusement was not due to the question itself, but to his own inability to answer it. She was so naïve. Then she wanted to know why all the officers were white men. (82)

Jason attempts to explain the racism and the color line to her, but, ironically, before he can describe the system, Casper discovers them in violation of it.

A coincidence brings Casper to Aubertin's home, where he finds her alone with Jason. He immediately concludes that Jason has attempted to rape Aubertin. When Jason, insulted by Casper's insinuations, responds with asperity, Casper becomes incensed: "he felt like striking the insolent nigger" (89). He implies that if Jason were caught in the same circumstances in South Carolina, then he would be lynched. Instead, Casper has Jason charged by a court martial, an ersatz lynching, even though he has committed no infraction. He receives a relatively light sentence, demotion to private, but the experience leaves him completely disillusioned about the place of African American soldiers in the war and, by extension, in the United States. He hears the phrases used to legitimate this war in his head, but he realizes that they do not apply to him: "make the world safe for democracy—war to end war—self determination for oppressed people. But they don't mean black people. Oh no, black people don't count. They only count the dead" (92). Jason's comprehension of the African American soldier's actual role in the war foreshadows the experience African American soldiers will face upon returning home. He essentially states that the acquisition of civil rights through military service is a myth, meaning that African American soldiers have been deliberately deceived into fighting for a national ideal they cannot attain. Ironically, the book's ending, in which Jason and Casper, wounded in no man's land during a German offensive, die in each other's arms, suggests that African American and whites may find a common humanity in death, if not in life.¹⁴

Jason's story indicates that the color line crossed the Atlantic with the soldiers. During World War I, in fact, the War Department made efforts to establish the color line as official policy among the Allies. While in Europe, gathering information on African American soldiers after the Armistice, W. E. B. Du Bois discovered a document produced by the American Expeditionary Force to inform French military and civilian officials about how to treat African American soldiers. The document, titled "Secret Information Concerning Black American Troops," articulates the "position occupied by Negroes in the United States," explaining, with remarkable clarity, the color line:

[Americans] are afraid that contact with the French will inspire in black Americans aspirations which to them appear intolerable. . . . Although a citizen of the United States, the black man is regarded by the white American as an inferior being with whom relations of business or service only are possible. . . . The vices of the Negro are a constant menace to the American who has to repress them sternly. For instance, the black American troops in France have, by themselves, given rise to as many complaints of attempted rape as all the rest of the army. (Du Bois, "Documents of the War" 17)

To mitigate the possibility that equal treatment in France would lead to demands for equal treatment in America, the document offers a number of guidelines for relations between French people and African Americans. French soldiers, for example, should not eat with or shake hands with African American soldiers, and French soldiers should take pains not to praise African American soldiers in the presence of white soldiers. Finally, French citizens are admonished that "Americans become greatly incensed at any public expression of intimacy between white women and black men" (Du Bois,

“Documents of the War” 17). The document does not, however, make explicit that African American men are often lynched on the mere pretext of intimate relations with white women, nor does the secret information describe the effects of the color line and the practice of lynching on the African American soldiers.

Not Only War: The Story of Two Great Conflicts compares life on the black side of the color line to combat, suggesting that being African American in the United States is actually worse than war. The book’s epigraph explains the title’s significance:

William Tecumseh Sherman branded War for all time when he called it Hell. There is yet another gaping, abysmal Hell into which some of us are actually born or unconsciously sucked. The Hell that Sherman knew was a physical one—of rapine, destruction and death. This other, is a purgatory for the mind, for the spirit, for the soul of men. Not only War is Hell. (7)

The two great conflicts Daly mentions in the title are physical war and psychological war. The psychological hell African Americans endure, however, undercuts the ideals—Freedom, Liberty, and Equality—that motivated both the Civil War and World War I. Daly’s depiction of racism in the military indicts white Americans who fight for freedom overseas but condone brutality at home.

Mary Burrill’s play *Aftermath* (1919) encourages African American soldiers to continue their fight for liberty in America. In the play, John Thornton returns to his family in South Carolina after the war. During his absence, his father has been lynched, but his sister, Millie, has refused to tell him, fearing that the news would upset him. John eagerly anticipates showing his father the medal he won in France, but Millie continues her deception, pretending that their father has left home for a moment when John arrives. But he learns the truth accidentally when a well-wisher voices her regret that his father had not lived to see his return. The story of his father’s lynching over a quarrel about the price of cotton sends him into a fierce rage.

John takes his gun from the mantel where he had placed it beside his father’s Bible, he repudiates the conciliatory religion that, in his opinion, renders African American resistant impotent, and he determines to seek revenge for his father’s murder. He says to his sister and grandmother:

I’ve been helpin’ the w’ite man git his freedom, I reckon I’d bettah try now to get my own! . . . I’m sick o’ these w’ite folks doin’s—we’re “fine trus’worthy feller citizuns” when they’re handin’ us out guns, an’ Liberty Bonds, an’ chuckin’ us off to die; but we ain’t a damn thing when it comes to handin’ us the rights we done fought an’ bled fu’! I’m sick o’ this sort o’ life—an’ I’m goin’ to put an end to it! . . . This ain’t no time fu’ preachers or prayers! You mean to tell me I mus’ let them w’ite devuls send me miles erway to suffer an’ be shot up fu’ the freedom of people I ain’t nevah seen, while they’re burnin’ an’ killin’ my folks here at home! To Hell with ’em! (90-91).

As the curtain closes, he hands a gun to his younger brother, and they leave the cabin to find their father’s killers, knowing that they will also be killed while avenging his death.

John’s story crystallizes the issue facing returning African American soldiers, specifically, if they would actually earn the rights for which they fought in Europe. By the end of the war, the initial optimism that Du Bois and other civil rights leaders felt about the war as a means to advance the racial cause passed, and it was replaced with a new attitude of defiant, militant confrontation. In an editorial in *The Crisis* addressed to the returning soldiers, Du Bois argued that the time had come to remember the race’s special grievance with the United States:

This is the country to which we Soldiers of Democracy return. This is the fatherland for which we fought! But it is *our* fatherland . . . we are cowards or jackasses if now that that war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land.

We return.
We return from fighting.
We return fighting.

Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why. ("Returning Soldiers" 381)

Du Bois stops short of advocating armed rebellion, but he makes plain the case that African American soldiers, in particular, and all African Americans, in general, deserved the same rights and freedoms that American soldiers fought to defend in Europe. Escalating racial violence, specifically the surge in lynchings following the war, indicated that those rights and freedoms would not be granted magnanimously.¹⁵

After the war many African Americans considered armed resistance an appropriate response to racial violence, and Communist agitators encouraged social revolution as a means to ending the practice of lynching and advancing civil rights. Several African American intellectuals supported the spread of socialism in the United States. Claude McKay, in particular, traveled to Russia in 1922, where he studied socialist ideology, advocated for the political organization of African Americans, and met with Leon Trotsky.¹⁶ At Trotsky's request, McKay wrote a revealing sketch about African American life, *The Negroes in America* (1923). The book addresses the usual justifications for lynching—sex and economics—and includes an account of a lynching in Texas. McKay suggests that, as a result of World War I and the continuing practice of lynching, African Americans are eager to embrace socialist ideology.

While in the Soviet Union, McKay also wrote a series of short stories portraying the experiences he describes in *The Negroes in America*, titled *Trial by Lynching: Stories about Negro Life in North America* (1923). The three brief vignettes dramatize the most frequent occurrences of violence along the color line. The first two stories depict incidents of sexually motivated interracial violence—the lynching of an African American man on the presumption of rape and the sexual victimization of a mixed-race woman. But the third story, "The Soldier's Return," complicates the typical sexual dynamic of the lynching story, representing the notion of the black body in a white uniform as a threat to the established social order in the South.

In the story, Frederick Taylor, a soldier able to pass for white, returns to the ominously named town of Great Neck, Georgia, whose setting may allude to the lynching of Wilbur Little. The story describes the separate and unequal welcome celebrations for the returning soldiers, as the mayor and local dignitaries address a throng of gaily decorated supporters on the day the white soldiers return, but only five African American ministers and a few family members able to miss work meet the fifteen returning African American soldiers. As the single act of civic significance, the mayor addresses the soldiers from his porch, telling them "that the war was over, and so now they must take off their uniforms and return to the work which they had done before the war" (38). Trouble erupts a few days later when Taylor, still in his uniform, encounters "the half-witted daughter of the postmaster," who runs screaming from him completely unprovoked (39). When Taylor gets to town, he is arrested, accused of attacking the girl, and held in jail. Meanwhile, a mob gathers with "torches, lanterns, a rope, and a can of kerosene" (39). The crowd drags Taylor from his cell and beats him as onlookers cry "lynch him!" At the last moment the mayor manages to quiet the crowd sufficiently to explain that he witnessed the incident and that Taylor had done nothing wrong, which, fortunately, manages to disperse the crowd and abort the lynching. Then the story takes a bizarre twist. Rather than release Taylor, the innocent victim in this melodrama, the sheriff tells him that he is to blame. "Pauline was frightened by seeing you wearing [your] soldier's uniform," he says, "You know that in our town we don't like it when niggers wear soldier's uniforms" (40). The mayor, who just saved Taylor's life, interrupts to explain precisely the white community's position on social equality:

[I]n our town there's plenty of work, thank God, and work clothes don't cost much. My brother has splendid work clothes in his store. But for some reason, you don't like to do anything and, moreover, you drive a buggy. One would think you were really some white gentleman. It seems to me, Frederick, that it's still necessary to place you under arrest and try you for vagrancy. We will take the uniform of a soldier of the U. S. off you and give you an outfit which is more appropriate for you. In any case, we have to set an example. Niggers never learn prudence by themselves until we show them, good and proper, their place. There is still plenty of work for niggers in Great Neck. We won't put up with even one of them loafing without work and putting on airs, even if he was in France, and they treated him there just like a white man. You'll have to work in a chain gang for a few months, Frederick. (40-41)

The dynamics of race relations are imbricated with issues of labor and control. The presence of the “uniform of a soldier of the U. S.” distorts the power dynamics in this relationship, so to reestablish the normative paradigm and to prevent the assertion of equality—here construed as such subversive actions as riding in a buggy—the white hegemony forcefully subordinates the African American veteran.

Frederick Taylor, whose name suggests Frederick Douglass, exemplifies the condition of African American World War I veterans in the postwar U. S. South. While the wave of lynchings and the violence of the Red Summer of 1919 indicate that the white social hegemony continued to brutalize African Americans, the defiance of the New Negro also suggests that the desire to fight for social equality had emerged as a major factor in American race relations. African American veterans did, in fact, return fighting in many subtle and subversive ways. The depiction of the African American veteran—repudiated, violated, and alienated—in literary texts by African American writers represents one of these means of fighting back. In the poem “A Roman Holiday” McKay brandishes one of the most effective rhetorical weapons available: hypocrisy. “Black Southern men,” he exhorts,

like hogs await your doom!
 White wretches hunt and haul you from your huts,
 They squeeze the babies out of your women's womb,
 They cut your members off, rip out your guts
 . . . Bravo Democracy! Hail greatest Power
 That saved sick Europe in her darkest hour! (McKay, *Complete Poems* 137).

For African American southerners fighting for democracy, the true battle took place not in Europe, but in America.¹⁷

Although Walter White did not serve in the Army, he fought in the battle for racial democracy in America. In his autobiography, *A Man Called White* (1948), he recounts that he took a required physical examination to qualify for the officers' training camp at Ft. Des Moines, but he and two other light-skinned recruits were summarily flunked, while a frail, dark-skinned applicant was accepted. Later, White learned why light-skinned applicants were denied. “Wild rumors,” he says, “born of guilty consciences no doubt, were sweeping the South that the ‘Huns’ were industriously at work among Southern Negroes to spread unrest. These German agents and spies, so the tales ran, were capitalizing on Negro bitterness against lynching and race prejudice” (36).¹⁸ Since he was exempt from the draft due to his skin color, White used his ability to pass and his knowledge of southern racial customs to investigate lynchings and race riots for the NAACP during World War I. He published shocking accounts of racist brutality in national magazines and wrote one of the first documentary histories of lynching, *Rope and Faggot* (1929).

Yet White's novel, *The Fire in the Flint* (1924), may be one of the clearest, most perceptive descriptions of racism in the early twentieth-century South. The book portrays the experience of Dr. Kenneth Harper, an African American Southerner who studied medicine in the North and who served as an officer in the Army in France. He returns to his hometown in Georgia after the war to open a segregated

clinic, hoping for a prosperous career as an accommodationist professional. Initially, he accedes to the accommodationism of his father's generation, because he recalls Booker T. Washington's mantra: "Any Negro can get along without trouble in the South if he only attends to his own business" (17). But his story reveals that increasing tensions between whites and blacks in the postwar South made it inherently impossible for an African American man, especially an intellectual war veteran, to mind his own business.

Maybe in time the race problem would be solved just like that . . . when some great event would wipe away the artificial lines . . . as in France. . . . He thought of the terrible nights and days in the Argonne. . . . He remembered the night he had seen a wounded black soldier and a wounded white Southern one, drink from the same canteen. . . . They didn't think about color at those times. . . . Wouldn't the South be a happy place if this vile prejudice didn't exist? (226)

His imaginary scenario suggests that the key to social equality is transcending place and nation as components of racial identity. In other words, if there were no South, then, perhaps, there would be no racism.

Regardless of Dr. Harper's imagining, after the war racial tensions in Central City increase, especially among returning African American soldiers. He explains that African American veterans expect to see changes in the United States following their military service:

Many [African American Southerners] entered the army, not so much because they were fired with the desire to fight for an abstract thing like world democracy, but, because they were a race oppressed, they entertained very definite beliefs that service in France would mean a more decent regime in America, when the war was over, for themselves and all others who were classed as Negroes. Many of them, consciously or subconsciously, had a spirit which might have been expressed like this: "Yes, we'll fight for democracy in France, but when that's over with we're going to expect and we're going to get some of that same democracy for ourselves right here in America." It was because of this spirit and determination that they submitted to the rigid army discipline to which was often added all the contumely that race prejudice could heap upon them. (43-44)

While many African American soldiers do return fighting, Dr. Harper sublimates his racial identity beneath his intellectual abstraction. In effect, he does not see his race as a key component of his identity as an American. That attitude begins to change after he returns to the South and experiences racism again. On one occasion, he meets a white doctor leaving an African American patient. The paternalistic doctor warns him not to spread any "No'then ideas 'bout social equality" because racial tensions have already escalated since "these niggers who went over to France and ran around with them French women have been causin' a lot of trouble 'round here, kickin' up a rumpus, and talkin' 'bout votin' and ridin' in the same car with white folks" (53). The white doctor's bigotry exemplifies white supremacist animosity toward advancing racial equality after the war. Any democracy returning soldiers found in America would be hard-won.

As an African American physician in the segregated South, Dr. Harper experiences the cruelties and absurdities of the color line. He treats white men for syphilis contracted from African American prostitutes, African American patients ignored by white physicians, and a dying African American man murdered by a white man with impunity. Eventually, he abandons accommodationism to agitate for racial equality. He becomes involved with an organization for the protection of African American sharecroppers whose activities arouse the attention of the Ku Klux Klan. White bases his description of the fictional National Negro Farmer's Co-operative and Protective League on The Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America, a group of African American sharecroppers in Phillips County, Arkansas who attempted to incorporate in 1919. When several white farm owners and police

officers attempted to intimidate the group into disbanding, a riot erupted, leading to the lynching of more than a dozen African American farmers. White investigated the incident in Phillips County on behalf of the NAACP.¹⁹ While passing as a white journalist, he not only interviewed the governor and met with several prominent members of the white community, but also came close to being lynched himself; only a timely warning prevented him from walking into a gruesome death.²⁰

White's experience in Phillips County likely inspired his portrayal of racial violence in *The Fire in the Flint*.²¹ To squash the sharecroppers' organization, the Klan targets Dr. Harper, because they assume that only an educated war veteran would have the audacity to expect equal protection under the law. While he is out of town, a group of white Klan thugs abduct and rape his younger sister, Mamie. His brother Bob, a Harvard-bound law student, confronts the thugs, shoots two of them dead, and then flees. Bob, always more militant than his brother, may be a more accurate personification of the New Negro—the ethos expressed in McKay's poem "If We Must Die"—than his more assimilationist brother.²² After the shooting, a lynching party, originally intended for Dr. Harper, convenes to track and eventually torture and kill Bob. But Bob refuses to die like a hog. Calculating the number of bullets he has left and reserving one for himself, he faces the murderous, cowardly pack and shoots as many of them as he can before killing himself. When Dr. Harper returns to Central City the news of his sister's rape and his brother's death sends him into an unmitigated rage. In his anger, he recalls the shibboleths of democracy that he idealized, and he finally realizes the absurdity of American racism and the arbitrariness of the color line:

"Superior race"! "Preservers of civilization"! "Superior" indeed! They called Africans inferior! They, with smirking hypocrisy, reviled the Turks! They went to war against the "Huns" because of Belgium! None of these had ever done a thing so bestial as these "preservers of civilization" in Georgia! Civilization! Hell! The damned hypocrites! The liars! The fiends! "White civilization"! Paugh! Black and brown and yellow hands had built it! The white fed like carrion on the rotting flesh of the darker peoples! And called their toil their own! And burned those on whose bodies their vile civilization was built! (271)

Juxtaposing the viciousness of the attacks on his family with the vacuity of the abstractions of white civilization, his tirade reveals the utter futility of accommodationism, which merely reinforces the color line. His comparison of the Huns to Georgians suggests that the war in Europe was fought under false pretences because barbarity and injustice are equally common in America.

The novel's climactic scene, which White himself calls "melodramatic," purposefully challenges the taboos of the color line (*A Man Called White* 67). Dr. Harper receives an emergency call from a white mother. She explains that her daughter has begun to hemorrhage, that no other doctor can treat her, and that her husband is in Atlanta. At first he curses the woman and the white race and refuses to treat the girl, but soon his sense of humanity causes him to relent. Although his family has been brutally violated and although he realizes that he has been targeted for lynching, he enters the home of a white woman and her daughter at night without a white male escort, thus flagrantly and fatally transgressing the color line. He treats the girl, barely saving her life, but as he leaves the home Klan thugs seize him. They accuse him of raping the white woman, which they attribute to his exposure to French women during the war. "I allus said these niggers who went to France an' ran with those damn French women'd try some of that same stuff when they came back!," says one of the thugs, "Ol' Vardaman was right! Ought never t' have let niggers in th' army anyhow!" (286).²³ The Klan lynches Dr. Harper, but White does not describe the lynching in the text. Instead, he concludes the book with a short newspaper notice about the lynching of "Doc Harper" for sexual assault on the wife of a prominent white citizen. The release states that he "became frightened before accomplishing

his purpose,” that he confessed to the crime, that he was “put to death by a mob which numbered five thousand,” and that “he was burned at the stake” (300). The terms of the press release thus appear to reinforce the lynching ritual: a black beast rapist transgresses the color line, admits his crime, affirms the superiority of the white race, and is symbolically and violently purged from the community.

White’s omission of the elaborate, macabre ritual of the lynching in the novel becomes its own powerfully incisive statement. In fact, while lynching figures into each of these narratives as a central theme, none of the stories juxtaposing black soldiers with lynching actually depict a lynching, leaving the act invisible but omnipresent. This strategy suggests the political and aesthetic significance of lynching narratives in African American literature. The idea of lynching permeated the American racial imaginary, defining the nation’s racial hierarchy. For white Americans, lynching rituals unified the community and solidified the race’s social superiority; for African Americans, lynchings degraded the community and ingrained the race’s social inferiority. Depicting the gruesome detail of a lynching, therefore, has the effect of dehumanizing the victim. So many African American writers veil the lynching as a means of humanizing the victim and dehumanizing perpetrators.²⁴ Texts that draw upon the trope of the African American soldier use the uniform to humanize the victims, so the uniform, as a symbol of military service, is more important to the political and aesthetic agenda in these narratives than the lynching. Most studies of lynching focus on the degrading impact of these spectacles on African Americans, but these texts indicate that lynching could be repurposed to promote equality.

White’s impressionistic depiction of Dr. Harper’s lynching, for example, subverts the lynchers’ intended message, portraying the mob as beasts and implicitly questioning the values of a country that would fight for liberty abroad but condone brutality at home. This, indeed, is the message of each of the texts that juxtapose images of lynching with African American World War I veterans. The African American soldier inherently undercuts the traditional justification for the lynching ritual. Even in cases such as Montgomery Jason’s, Frederick Taylor’s, and Dr. Kenneth Harper’s, where allegations of rape are assumed or alleged, the actual motivation for lynching is the fear of racial equality. And in the cases of Chris in *Mine Eyes Have Seen* and John Thornton in *Aftermath*, where lynchings do not directly involve the soldiers, the fact that soldiers appear in the text underscores the inherent inequality of American racism. Military service makes an unequivocal case for equal citizenship, so cases of African American veterans threatened with lynching, of their family members lynched in their absence, or their actual lynching expose the hypocrisy of American intervention in World War I and the arbitrary brutality of American racism. In the case of Wilbur Little and in each of the fictional narratives, men who once fought to preserve democracy were denied the most fundamental right granted to American citizens, the right to life, much less the rights to liberty and to the pursuit of happiness. These narratives, in effect, promote the cause of social equality, using literary depictions of military service to achieve civil rights even when actual military service did not.

Notes

1. For additional background on lynching, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women’s Campaign Against Lynching* (Columbia UP, 1979); Robyn Wiegman, “The Anatomy of a Lynching,” in *American Sexual Politics: Sex Gender, and Race since the Civil War*, John C. Fout and Maura Shaw Tantillo, eds. (U of Chicago P, 1993) 223-47; W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (U of Illinois P, 1993); Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (U of Illinois P, 1995); and W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (U of North Carolina P, 1997).

2. Michelle Wallace explores the direct correlation between *The Birth of a Nation's* glorification of the lynching ritual and the upsurge in lynchings in "The Good Lynching and *The Birth of a Nation: Discourses and Aesthetics of Jim Crow*," *Cinema Journal* 43.1 (Fall 2003): 85-104.
3. For more details about African American soldiers in World War I, see Arthur Barbeau and Florette Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: Black American Troops in World War I* (Temple UP, 1974); Robert V. Haynes, *A Night of Violence: The Houston Riot of 1917* (Louisiana State UP, 1976); Stephen L. Harris, *Harlem's Hell Fighters: The African-American 369th Infantry in World War I* (Potomac Books, 2003); and Richard Slotkin, *Lost Battalions: The Great War and the Crisis of American Nationality* (Henry Holt, 2005).
4. William G. Jordan discusses the black press's role in the war effort and the New Negro movement in *Black Newspapers & America's War for Democracy, 1914-1920* (U of North Carolina P, 2001).
5. For information on the red summer of 1919, the postwar civil rights movements, and the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, see David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (Penguin, 1997); Mark Robert Schneider, *"We Return Fighting": The Civil Rights Movement in the Jazz Age* (Northeastern UP, 2002); and Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching, 1909-1950* (Temple UP, 1980).
6. Two recently published anthologies recover a number of texts that address lynching: Perkins and Stephens's *Strange Fruit* and Rice's *Witnessing Lynching*.
7. For more information about Alice Dunbar-Nelson's activities during the war, see Nikki L. Brown, "War Work, Social Work, Community Work: Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Federal War Work Agencies, and Southern African American Women" in *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919*, Barbara McCaskill and Caroline Gebhard, eds. (New York UP, 2006) 197-209.
8. Emmett Scott, formerly personal secretary to Booker T. Washington, was appointed as Special Assistant to the Secretary of War with regard to race relations. A devoted accommodationist, he lobbied for African American war support with minimal concessions for social equality. His history of the war presents a myopic and self-congratulatory image of African American soldiers. Hull suggests that Alice Dunbar-Nelson, the widow of Paul Laurence Dunbar, had an extramarital affair with Scott, which may have contributed to her patriotic zeal (68).
9. Jeanette Keith discusses the widespread draft resistance by both white and African American men in *Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight: Race, Class, and Power in the Rural South during the First World War* (U of North Carolina P, 2004).
10. The cover of November 1918 issue of *The Crisis* depicts an idealized image of an African American soldier heroically waving an American flag above a trench as gunfire erupts around him.
11. Mitchell argues that the play has a more subtle meaning than its superficial jingoism. She explains, "Prowar interpretations assume that Chris's conversion accurately represents Dunbar-Nelson's stance, but such readings overlook the importance anti-lynching dramatists placed on domesticity" (222). She contends thus that the play's message concerns the solidity of the African American family more than the duty of African American soldiers.
12. For biographical information on Daly, see James Payne, "A MELUS Interview: Victor R. Daly," *MELUS* 12.2 (Summer 1985): 87-92.
13. The 93rd Division trained briefly at a military base near Spartanburg, but a near-riot involving African American officers and white civilians prompted the War Department to mobilize the division to Europe much earlier than originally intended. Daly's sketchy biographical record does not indicate if he was attached to the 93rd Division at the time.
14. The ending of *Not Only War* may draw from Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr.'s play "On the Fields of France" published in *The Crisis* in 1920.
15. Faulkner portrays the African American soldier in the white imaginary in the character of Caspey Strother in *Flags in the Dust*. He renders Caspey as militant and bombastic but ultimately harmless. A committed shirker and coward, Caspey claims to have killed many Germans and, more audaciously, to have slept with white women in Europe. He tells his family: "I dont take nothin' offen no white man no mo', lootenant ner captain ner M.P. War showed de white folks dey cant git along widout de colored man. Trample him in de dust, but when de trouble bust loose, hit's 'Please, suh, Mr Colored Man; right dis way whar de bugle blowin', Mr Colored Man; you is de savior of de country.' And now de colored race gwine reap de benefits of de war, and dat soon" (67).
16. For details about McKay's short-lived involvement with Communism, see his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home* (1937) and Wayne F. Cooper, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance* (Louisiana State UP, 1987). For context about African American writers and socialism, see William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African American Writing and Communism between the Wars* (Columbia UP, 1999) and Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922-1963* (Duke UP, 2002).

17. McKay describes the experience of the dispossessed African American veteran in *Home to Harlem* (1928), one of the most successful novels of the Harlem Renaissance.

18. During the war, the U. S. government did spy on African Americans. For details about the programs, see Mark Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance: African Americans and the United States Government during World War I* (Indiana UP, 2001) and Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., *"Investigate Everything": Federal Efforts to Compel Black Loyalty during World War I* (Indiana UP, 2002).

19. For details about the Phillips County riot, see Grif Stockley, *Blood in the Eyes: The Elaine Race Massacres of 1919* (U of Arkansas P, 2001). After World War I, several grassroots organizations, such as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, agitated for labor equality and civil rights. For details on the emerging African American labor movement, see Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (U of North Carolina P, 2001).

20. White describes his experience in Phillips County in his autobiography, *A Man Called White* (46-51), and he discusses his narrow escape from the lynch mob in "I Investigate Lynchings," an article originally published in *American Mercury* in 1929.

21. Richard Wright briefly lived with his aunt and uncle in Elaine, Arkansas, the seat of Phillips County, until his uncle was murdered by a white mob in 1916. He describes his life there in his autobiography *Black Boy* (1945).

22. McKay's poem "If We Must Die" summarizes the ethos of the New Negro movement, and it accurately describes Bob's willful defiance of the lynch mob:

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

23. Mississippi Senator James K. Vardaman, an ardent racist and isolationist, opposed America's involvement in World War I largely because he believed the prospect of African American soldiers trained to kill whites to be a greater threat to the U. S. than the Germans. For details about Vardaman, see William F. Holmes, *The White Chief: James Kimble Vardaman* (Louisiana State UP, 1970).

24. Other writers have used variations of this strategy. Richard Wright in "Between the World and Me" (1935) and Ralph Ellison in "The Birthmark" (1940) describe the gory aftermath of lynchings, emphasizing the outrageous brutality of the victims' torture. Margaret Walker in *Jubilee* (1967) and James Weldon Johnson in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) refer to lynchings incidentally, suggesting that they are an inevitable and arbitrary aspect of African American life. And James Baldwin audaciously describes a lynching from the perspective of a white man in "Going to Meet the Man" (1965), thus dehumanizing the animalistic perpetrator. He also describes the mutilated body of a World War I soldier in uniform in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1952) indicating the enduring presence of the lynched soldier in African American literature.

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