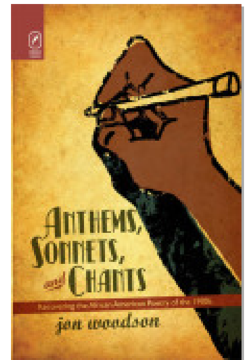
A Concluding Note



Published by

Woodson, Jon.
Anthems, Sonnets, and Chants: Recovering the African American Poetry of the 1930s.
The Ohio State University Press, 2010.
Project MUSE. https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24279.

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The fluid nature of literary recovery (tied as it is to reception, reputation, publishing, prizes, cultural turns, and paradigm shifts) was reified for me recently when a postal clerk affixed a sixty-one-cent Richard Wright 2009 commemorative stamp to my envelope. Previously, the reconstruction of Robert Johnson's identity by the United States Postal Service had been inherent in the removal of the cigarette from a 1938 photobooth portrait of the great blues singer; the twenty-nine-cent Robert Johnson commemorative stamp of 1994 showed no cigarette, thereby shifting the discourse of the blues from despair, nihilism, hedonism, and intersubjective violence to a discourse of uplift—a discourse that romanticizes genius and endorses racial inclusion. In the case of Wright, it is the existence of the stamp itself that signals his rehabilitation, commodification, and neutralization. The United States Postal Service suggests that "Richard Wright used his pen to battle racism" (M. Jones, "Postal Service"). This rhetoric abolishes the systemic structure of the oppressions that Wright suffered and wrote about; the "abstract and disembodied racism" that Wright is said to have confronted is (to cite one example) disconnected from the lynch mobs and from the federal government that never passed an antilynching law. In explaining why I was surprised by the Richard Wright Stamp, I related to the clerk that Wright had been a member of the Communist Party, that he had lived for many years as an expatriate in France, and that some black intellectuals have suggested that he was murdered by the Central Intelligence Agency. In 1947, an expatriate Wright stated in an interview that "to be American in the United States means to be white, protestant, and very rich. This excludes almost entirely black people and anyone else who can be easily identi-

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fied" (quoted in Tuhkanen 3). Richard Wright, the surrealist revolutionary poet, thus anchors the reclaiming discourse in extremes of thought, action, and emotion that characterized the black life-world (*Lebenswelt*) of the 1930s. Wright's example suggests what must be done constantly to reveal the other poets who have disappeared into contemporary social contexts that restrict and narrow the terms of their art.

Though this study examines black poetry through the crises of economic collapse, racial oppression, and race war, these catastrophes by no means exhaust the categorical horrors of the black life-world of the 1930s. Adam Gussow argues that the terrors of the lynching campaign that ran from the 1890s into the 1930s had a determining influence on black American culture—though subvocally, where lynching is the haunting, repressed contents of the blues: "Nor is the 'haunting' sound of early Mississippi blues merely [W. C.] Handy's unconscious projection of his own unresolved psychic conflicts onto unremarkable folk material. There is every reason to think that the 'agonizing strain' he describes may have been just that: the musical expression of a regionally inflected black social unconscious under grievous pressure" (73–74). An earlier version of this study contained a long chapter on the black antilynching poetry of the 1930s. There I concluded that the subject positions in the antilynching discourse had developed from first being centered on powerless witnesses (speaking trees), to being centered on a variety of victims (the lynched people and subsequently their children, who first are mute but then speak), and finally centering on militant children. Those imaginary politically engaged children were projections into the future. The discursive innovation in the black antilynching poetry of the 1930s ultimately positioned the child as a racial leader—a militant spokesperson and activist.

The culmination of the poetic antilynching discourse that centers on the motif of the black child—which used the black child so effectively that it was also the culmination of the poetic antilynching discourse—came in Esther Popel's "Flag Salute," published in *The Crisis* in 1934, 1936, 1938, and on the cover in 1940. Popel, a schoolteacher in Washington, D.C., was a minor figure in the Harlem Renaissance and was one of the poets characterized by Alain Locke as being "concerned with 'romantic escapes'" (Redmond 223), Popel is not mentioned in Eugene Redmond's *Drumvoices,* which was a critical historical account of African American poetry up until the 1970s. Though Popel did publish what can be described as "romantic" poems in journals during the 1930s, she was one of the many black poets writing in the 1930s who at times embraced social realism. The "new realist"/"romantic" rubric that left-leaning critics employed in the 1930s (and again in the 1970s, when critics in the black arts movement recovered their forerunners' work)

did not prevent the so-called new realist poets from writing in the romantic mode, and it did not concede recognition when the so-called romantic poets wrote in the realist mode: to be ordained a "romantic" meant being cut off from serious consideration by the leading critics.

Popel's "Flag Salute" operates at the intersection of three *objective* texts that form a *meta-objective* text, endowing the poem with an unassailable moral judgment. "Flag Salute" anticipated what Gunnar Myrdal later defined as the American dilemma, the injustices that fly in the face of America's founding principles. In the poem, the flag salute indicts the report of the lynching. That Popel arrives at this effect through the deconstructive manipulation of texts by Negro students is the ultimate protest of racial injustice.

FLAG SALUTE

(Note: In a classroom in a Negro school a pupil gave as his news topic during the opening exercises of the morning, a report of the Princess Anne lynching of Oct. 18, 1933. A brief discussion of the facts of the case followed, after which the student in charge gave this direction: Pupils, rise, and give the flag salute! They did so without hesitation!)

"I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE TO THE FLAG"—

They dragged him naked
Through the muddy streets,
A feeble-minded black boy!
And the charge? Supposed assault
Upon an aged woman!
"Of the United States of America"—
One mile they dragged him
Like a sack of meal,
A rope around his neck,
A bloody ear
Left dangling by the patriotic hand
Of Nordic youth! (A boy of seventeen!)
"And to the Republic for which it stands"—
And then they hanged his body to a tree
Below the window of the county judge
Whose pleadings for the battered human flesh
Were stifled by the brutish, raucous howls
Of men, and boys, and women with their babes,
Brought out to see the bloody spectacle

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Of murder in the style of ’33!
(Three thousand strong, they were!)
“One nation, Indivisible”—
To make the tale complete
They built a fire—
What matters that the stuff they burned
Was flesh—and bone—and hair—
And reeking gasoline!
“With Liberty—and Justice”—
They cut the rope in bits
And passed them out,
For souvenirs, among the men and boys!
The teeth no doubt, on golden chains
Will hang
About the favored necks of sweethearts, wives
And daughter, mother, sisters, babies, too!
“For All!”

Popel’s “Flag Salute” framed a viable poetic response to lynching. Popel’s poem is unique in the way that it presents a dissenting voice, for much of the antilynching poetry of the 1930s was protest poetry that did not rise above obligatory conceptions. At the same time, perhaps unavoidably, the poem was effective enough to stir up opposition to itself. The original publication in 1934 came in an issue dedicated to the theme of higher education. The issue promised news of the 1934 college graduates. The cover featured an illustration in the social realist style. It portrayed two oversized figures, one in chains with his arms around proportionally smaller figures (a laborer, a farmer, and a scrubwoman), while the second oversized figure holds a diploma, wears a mortarboard, and soars above two figures who watch and rejoice. Below the picture was a headline by Langston Hughes: “Cowards from the Colleges.” Popel’s poem appeared in the right-hand column of a complex page, which showed a picture of a crowd across the bottom—NAACP in Oklahoma City, Okla., June 27—July 1, 1934. The left-hand column contained a news story about recent NAACP events and “Persistent Quest,” a sonnet by C. Faye Bennett. When the poem reappeared in May of 1936, it ran beneath a heading that proclaimed “School Officials Dislike This.” The editor’s note that followed stated that the poem was one of the items judged “objectionable” by a committee that reported to the Board of Education. The committee recommended against approving *The Crisis* for use in the District of Columbia’s schools. The poem was printed below the headline and divided into two columns. The remainder of the page was occupied by the

end of "'Objectionable Matter' in *The Crisis*," a story that began on the previous page. Apparently, the controversy continued, for the May 1938 issue carried as one of its headlines "*The Crisis* 'Not Approved,' A Ruling by the Board of Education in Washington, D.C." The end of the news story poses the question "of how a magazine could be published in the United States of America in the interest of Negroes and not be critical of the white race" ("*The Crisis* Is Not Approved"). The poem ran again in November of 1940, this time on the cover of the issue. The poem's visual appearance was striking. It appeared within a single-line border beneath the masthead, and the type size of the title was nearly as large as the type size of the magazine's name. The cover of the issue immediately preceding the number that featured Popel's poem had showed black men manning an anti-aircraft cannon, so the cover bearing a poem beneath the masthead of *The Crisis* would have seemed at once restrained and ominous. This time, Popel and the editors revised the poem's introductory note:

> (Note: In these days when armies are marching and there is much talk of loyalty and democracy on all fronts in America, it is being said that the strongest defense of democracy lies in the unity of all groups in the nation and a conviction that each has a stake in a democratic government. When it was announced in Washington on October 9, almost simultaneously, that the federal anti-lynching bill had been killed in the Senate and that Negro Americans would be segregated and discriminated against in the U. S. armed forces, *THE CRISIS* received several requests to reprint this poem. It was written after a lynching which occurred in Princess Anne, Maryland, October 18, 1933.)

The note had been revised so that it was politically and socially relevant to the threat of war and the failure of the government to address the continuing fact of racial violence. This relevance came at the expense of poetic meaning, for the crucial description of the school scene has been omitted. Given the urgency of the events described in the new note, it is possible to forgive the editors of *The Crisis* for their insensitivity to the text, but it must be pointed out that as it appeared in 1940, despite the grand appearance that it made on the cover, the poem had been rendered incoherent. Nevertheless, Esther Popel's disturbing poem "Flag Salute" was used to tie the continuation of racial terrorism to the promise that the African American would be expected to play a role in the imminent world war. The editor's note in the 1940 version of "Flag Salute" indicated that the poem was printed because of urgings from the readership. The note tangibly indicates that poetry in this vein was an important component of the black culture of the decade and that

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for many people it gave expression to crucial insights, feelings, and ideas that otherwise might have been lost to trauma, incoherence, and inarticulacy. Thus, far from being weak and irrelevant, in the 1930s poetry was a vital component of the complex and multifaceted African American struggle for identity, equality, and purpose.

In the second chapter, I have theorized that the sonnets written by black poets in the 1930s can be viewed as a metatext that frames the identity-work through which the poets constructed the subject positions that helped African Americans to adjust to the conditions of modernity, experimentally attuning their self-concepts to the performances of race. The aspirational modernity illuminated by reading the black poetry of the 1930s broached unanticipated realms. When Owen Dodson x-rayed Langston Hughes's mediational persona of the radical-left race man, he did so through Oswald Spengler's deduction that history was out of human control. With history no longer the progress-driven comic opera of Marxism or the equally comic opera of technological capitalism, Dodson posed the question of the meaning of race for the black man. These themes were further amplified by the Spengler-inflected poems of Victor Welborn Jenkins and Marcus Christian. In essence what emerges above all is what Gagnier calls "the tension between social role and desire that differentiates one's identity from one's self" (228). This theme emerges in the Harlem Renaissance and is never put to rest. As Eugene Holmes recognized, "The Negro has been imbued with the American Dream" (245). However, modernity demonstrates two phases. In one phase there is the emancipatory progress of speed, technology, urbanity, and mass communication over superstition, parochialism, and isolation; this allows for the admission of individuality, originality, genius, and masterpieces. On the other hand, there is in modernity the repressive phase of collectivity, productivity, public art, impersonality, and mechanical reproduction. When accounts are written about a poet of the second phase, like Frank Marshall Davis, the poet is described as an engaged social realist. However, a comprehensive view shows that there is a plurality of subject positions in play as expressed by the various modes of Davis's poetry, modes such as social realism, jazz poetry, social satire, and love poetry. Though it may be an overstatement to compare Davis's poetry with Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, I cannot help but think of how the novel's totalitarian government used "newspeak" to control the characters' thoughts and rewrite history.

Various observers during the thirties claimed that a crucial body of black poetry written during a time of severe social and cultural trial did not exist or did not have substantive worth. When critics addressed these poems, they usually misrepresented the work through an impoverished selection of texts. My investigation is provisional and points the way to more detailed

investigations. In an early phase of my research, I assembled a database of 563 poems published in black journals in the 1930s. By using this database, I was able to address in a preliminary manner some questions that otherwise would not have come up. I was mainly concerned with previous conceptions of the poetry of the 1930s. Future work could bring about new insights into the black poetry of the 1930s. However, the importance of the sonnet in the black poetry of the 1930s did not become apparent through the database, which was not set up to deal with form. This suggests that the data mining and computational linguistics used by Franco Moretti may be used with large groups of poems to address new kinds of questions. Had I been aware of methods like Moretti's, my investigation may have taken that direction, but I was not able to use my database beyond making concordances and counting motifs. Quantitative information may be useful in breaking down the habitual assumptions that have been made regarding African American poetry—from the start an insufficiently studied body of texts.