



## “New Negro” v. “Niggeratti”: Defining and Defiling the Black Messiah

**Steve Pinkerton**

Allow me to propose two visual bookends to the Harlem Renaissance: Winold Reiss’s “The Brown Madonna,” which served as frontispiece to Alain Locke’s landmark anthology *The New Negro* (1925), and “Mary Madonna,” a 1930 drawing by Richard Bruce Nugent (figs. 1–2). Despite their similar titles, these pictures could hardly be more different. Reiss’s Madonna wears blue, in keeping with traditional iconography of the Virgin; a pale nimbus radiates from her figure, contributing to the portrait’s sacramental valence. She gazes chastely to one side, holding in her arms the (Christ) child who seems to incarnate that “New Negro” announced in large letters on the adjacent title page—herald of the race’s cultural renaissance in and through art. (Locke himself likely chose the image’s typological caption.)<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Nugent’s Mary stares directly at us with weary, licentious eyes. This racially indeterminate nude seems more Magdalene than Madonna, more erotic than maternal; two colorful triangles converge at her pelvis, calling attention to what may or may not be a site of holy reproduction.<sup>2</sup>

In either case, this transgressive Madonna hardly conforms to the ideal of bourgeois acceptability endemic to programs of “racial uplift” generally and to the ethos so carefully crafted five years earlier by Locke’s anthology. If Reiss’s Madonna functions, in Marlon Ross’s words, as an “allegory of spirituality purified of suggestive sexuality,” Nugent’s does the opposite: its suggestive sexuality “purifies” the image of its allegorical and spiritual freight.<sup>3</sup> How, indeed, can this drawing claim to depict the Madonna at all, especially given the perplexing absence of a child? The baby that functions in Reiss’s portrait as emblem of the

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**Steve Pinkerton** is a postdoctoral fellow in English at the University of Texas at Austin, where he is completing a book entitled “Blasphemous Modernism: Profiles in Profanation, from Joyce to Rushdie.” His other writings on twentieth-century literature and culture have appeared in *Studies in the Novel*, the *Journal of Modern Literature*, and the *African American Review*.





▲  
Fig. 1. Winold Reiss, *The Brown Madonna*, 1925. Fisk University Galleries, Nashville, Tennessee. Reproduced by permission of Renate Press.



▲  
Fig. 2. Richard Bruce Nugent, *Mary Madonna*, 1930. Reproduced with permission from the collection of Thomas H. Wirth.

nascent New Negro has disappeared from Nugent's vision—just as it disappears from *The New Negro* itself. For along with Reiss's sixteen other sketches and portraits that appeared in the anthology's first two printings, his "Brown Madonna" has not appeared in subsequent editions, including the only one currently in print.<sup>4</sup> One consequence of this erasure has been to vitiate the volume's originally insistent aura of messianic expectation, a messianism heralded by the "Brown Madonna" and her baby as well as by Reiss's suggestively beatific portraits of prominent New Negro figures: Locke, Countee Cullen, Paul Robeson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Elise McDougald, and others. These lush, full-color plates create a veritable renaissance iconography, one that establishes an almost *sacred* iconicity. Many of the subjects' heads float disembodied, evoking spiritual transcendence; their foreheads gleam with accentuated effect, suggesting haloes. Jean Toomer glows with a radiance that exceeds even the brown Madonna's, in keeping with the fact that he, more than any other contributor, is held to promise a fulfillment of the volume's messianic hopes. (William Stanley Braithwaite's *New Negro* essay even invokes Toomer as the "bright morning star of a new day of the race," echoing Christ's own self-identification as "the bright and morning star" in Revelation 22:16<sup>5</sup>).

To encounter *The New Negro* as it was originally published, then, is a little like reading a lavishly illustrated Bible. It is also to wonder whether the anthology offers itself, rather more literally than is commonly acknowledged, as "the Bible of the Harlem Renaissance."<sup>6</sup> As we will see, Locke's anthology not only participates in scriptural typology

but actually presents itself as a typological fulfillment of scripture, compiling a highly selective canon of renaissance texts and in the process providing a kind of New Testament for African American culture. Accordingly, the volume's messianic expectations simmer palpably beneath its surface, coming finally to a boil in the concluding essay by Du Bois: a document whose Revelatory character was, I argue, partly determined by Locke's own editorial hand.

Returning to the blasphemous character of Bruce Nugent's writings and art, I consider here how the works of Nugent and his friend Wallace Thurman—roommates in Harlem's notorious "Niggeratti Manor"—engage and challenge both orthodox Christianity and the New Negro dogma espoused by Locke's anthology. The pages that follow explore *The New Negro's* auto-sacralizing bid to consolidate, through a forceful appropriation of biblical rhetoric and revelation, this renaissance orthodoxy that Thurman and Nugent will so delight in defiling. To attend to these dynamics is to recognize a hitherto obscured theological core of Harlem Renaissance politics and poetics—to see, in short, how *The New Negro* and its less pious literary successors produce a cultural dialogue out of the dueling rhetorics of consecration and desecration, of prophecy and profanation.

### **The New Negro as New Testament**

Locke's anthology fairly hums with biblical imagery, cadence, and trope, from Aaron Douglas's illustrations to the scores and lyrics of "Negro spirituals" to the stories and poems of Rudolph Fisher, John Matheus, Eric Walrond, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, and Countee Cullen. (Years later, Wallace Thurman would caustically portray Cullen's writing process thus: "Fingers on typewriter, mind frantically conjuring African scenes. And there would of course be a Bible nearby."<sup>7</sup>) Locke himself establishes a biblical tone in his introduction, interpreting Harlem as "the home of the Negro's 'Zionism'" and then widening this observation's scope and implications: "As with the Jew, persecution is making the Negro international."<sup>8</sup> Later, he writes of American slavery and the "sorrow songs" that "the only historical analogy is the spiritual experience of the Jews and the only analogue, the Psalms."<sup>9</sup>

Locke's assessments here contribute to African America's deeply rooted typological identification with the Bible's "chosen people." Theophus Smith calls such imaginative figurations "Exodus strategies," reminding us that throughout African American history "all corporate liberation efforts can be configured . . . as dramatic reenactments of Exodus, and their leaders envisioned as approximate types of Moses."<sup>10</sup> In *The New Negro's* cultural moment, however—in the wake of a decade-long Exodus of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North—an updated messianic presence was called for. The *new* New Negroes, especially those black writers and artists who had established themselves in "the promised land" of Harlem, were through with needing a Moses; they desired a Christ.<sup>11</sup> Such expectation suffuses Locke's anthology, whose telling epigraph—"O, rise, shine for Thy Light is a' com-ing"—dispels any doubts

542 about the Christological import of “The Brown Madonna” on the previous leaf. It is in this context that Locke and other contributors establish, repeatedly, the New Negro’s role as redemptive prophet. “The black scholar, seer, sage, prophet sings his message,” declaims Albert Barnes in his prominently positioned essay.<sup>12</sup> According to Locke, the new black cultural figure must create “arresting visions and vibrant prophecies” in “rhapsodic Biblical speech,” affording African America “a new soul,” “a fresh spiritual and cultural focusing,” “a renewed race-spirit,” “a spiritual emancipation”: in short, “a spiritual quickening and racial leavening such as no generation has yet felt and known.”<sup>13</sup>

This lexicon of the sacred offers a useful, if not wholly satisfying, way to understand the contradictory obligations with which Locke’s anthology burdens the shoulders of the New Negro: to express his or her stake in the direction of the race through a paradoxically *disinterested* art, and to be best “representative” of that race by *not* striving to be representative. “The newer motive,” Locke writes, “in being racial is to be so purely for the sake of art”—to embrace a sacred calling in “the domain of pure and unbiassed art,” forsaking such profane pursuits as “the shambles of conventional polemics, cheap romance and journalism.”<sup>14</sup> The way Locke reconciles that seeming disjunction between, on one hand, the New Negro’s social and political functions of advancing the race and, on the other, this figure’s necessary commitment to a “pure,” transcendent, disengaged art is to unite both commitments in a sacred cultural project. Given the sacral character of the New Negro’s sociopolitical struggle, his or her art must likewise aspire to the condition of the sacred—must transcend, that is, precisely those worldly matters it is tasked with complementing.

Hence *The New Negro*’s near-biblical exhortations, the most insistent of which Locke reserves for last in a further echo of the New Testament. For Du Bois’s contribution, “The Negro Mind Reaches Out,” is the anthology’s Revelation, its most overtly and hauntingly apocalyptic text.<sup>15</sup> Signaling this concluding essay’s prophetic character is its portentous, vatic register: “With nearly every great European empire to-day walks its dark colonial shadow, while over all Europe there stretches the yellow shadow of Asia that lies across the world.”<sup>16</sup> Further, in asserting that “the day faintly dawns when the new force for international understanding and racial readjustment will and must be felt,” Du Bois invokes the paradoxical temporality of revelation, the blend of imminence (“the day dawns”) and elusiveness (“*faintly* dawns”) that characterizes all apocalyptic texts (413). Du Bois begins by recalling his famous pronouncement in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)—“The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line”—and by asking rhetorically whether this constitutes “prophecy or speculation” (385). His own answer, evidently, is “prophecy,” for in the essay’s closing words he will reiterate with confidence his vision of “the problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the Problem of the Color Line” (414).<sup>17</sup> The future’s hope, Du Bois proclaims, rests with a racial Redeemer: “the black apostle,” who will “devote himself to race uplift not by the compulsion of outer hate but by the lure of inner vision” (397).

Du Bois, of course, has inner visions of his own to share. One of these emerges in his opening paragraph, immediately establishing the essay’s apocalyptic tenor: the “great event of these great years, the World War” (385). That event, in words that ring tragi-

cally prophetic from this side of World War II, has left behind a "fatal seed" destined to pullulate into further "world dissension and catastrophe" (385). The war returns when Du Bois subsequently arraigns France for using black men as "'shock' troops" in a large-scale "blood sacrifice" (392–93). It returns most forcefully, however, in the unsettlingly eschatological vision of Du Bois's conclusion, which invokes a great cleansing holocaust and the heavenly city that lies just beyond it: "There came during the Great War . . . a vision of the Glory of Sacrifice, a dream of a world greater, sweeter, more beautiful and more honest than ever before; a world without war, without poverty and without hate. I am glad it came. Even though it was a mirage it was eternally true" (413).

Prompted by the apocalyptic violence of a world war, this vision of a New Jerusalem succeeding yet another annihilation is as fleeting, historically (merely "a mirage"), as it is "eternally true." Our prophet nonetheless senses the vision's return: "To-day some faint shadow of it comes to me again" (413). Du Bois locates his prophesied Holy City in Liberia, the nation founded by freed American slaves: a land of "Silver and Gold and Ivory," "a little thing set upon a Hill" that recalls both Christ's Sermon on the Mount and John Winthrop's famous self-sanctifying trope (414; cf. Matt. 5:14).<sup>18</sup> Though small, Du Bois writes, Liberia has labored valiantly "to resist the power of modern capital," the economic and political complex that "owns and rules England, France, Germany, America and Heaven. And can Liberia escape the power that rules the world? I do not know; but I do know unless the world escapes, the world as well as Liberia will die; and if Liberia lives it will be because the World is reborn as in that vision splendid of 1918" (414). That it requires the violence of a horrific war to elicit this "splendid" vision of the world's rebirth—a vision predicated on another violent "cleansing" in baptismal blood—is as chilling as it is true to the rhetorical tradition of apocalyptic eschatology.

It is worth comparing this essay with its initial version, an article entitled "Worlds of Color" that had appeared in the April 1925 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. Consider, first, the opening paragraph of each version, where Du Bois addresses the "catastrophe" of World War I:

How deep were the roots of this catastrophe entwined about the color line? And of the legacy left, what of the darker race problems will the world inherit?<sup>19</sup>

Fruit of the bitter rivalries of economic imperialism, the roots of that catastrophe were in Africa, deeply entwined at bottom with the problems of the color line. And of the legacy left, the problems the world inherits hold the same fatal seed; world dissension and catastrophe still lurk in the unsolved problems of race relations. (*The New Negro*, 385)

The metaphor of roots remains in the *New Negro* essay, but the mode of address has changed from query to assertion, and from uncertainty to the total certainty we expect of our prophets. The register has also changed considerably, with the addition of some nice apocalyptic touches ("that same fatal seed"; "world dissension and catastrophe still lurk"). Further on, we find a similarly apocalyptic sentence with no precedent in the earlier version: "What prophet can tell what world-tempest lurks in these cloud-like shadows?" (389). Liberia, earlier "set upon a hill" (444), is in *The New Negro* "set upon

544 a Hill,” emphasizing the biblical allusion and its grandiloquence (414). And whereas, in the earlier article, Du Bois warns that “world democracy as well as Liberia” may “die” (444), in the *New Negro* version it is “the world” itself that may die (414)—a more patently apocalyptic scenario.

Still more significant is that a lengthy portion of the *New Negro* essay does not appear in the earlier publication, a fact that has gone unremarked by scholars of Locke as well as of Du Bois (409–13). Locke himself apparently chose to include this section from among the drafts and fragments Du Bois had produced in preparation for the *Foreign Affairs* piece.<sup>20</sup> Later, Locke would even characterize his midwifery as an actual “rewriting”: “I rewrote [Du Bois’s contribution] for him from two old articles of his that he contemptuously tossed over his desk top to me. . . . He refused to write anything fresh.”<sup>21</sup> Certainly Locke revised “Worlds of Color” throughout, and given that Du Bois’s participation in the anthology was “somewhat clenched”—the two men were not on good terms in 1925—Locke’s recollection of Du Bois’s near-total indifference deserves our attention if not our outright credulity.<sup>22</sup> In any case, it is striking to reflect that much of this essay’s most plainly apocalyptic language appears in the several pages that do not appear in Du Bois’s *Foreign Affairs* article.<sup>23</sup> Together with the others, these additions demonstrate Locke’s concerted effort to ratchet up the apocalypticism of Du Bois’s article for its inclusion as *The New Negro’s* Revelation. As elsewhere in his stewardship of the anthology, Locke here took a heavy hand.<sup>24</sup> And no less than the suggestive placement of “The Brown Madonna” cradling the New Negro at the book’s beginning, the apocalypticism at its end ensured that the entire volume would cohere in the desired New-Testament fashion.

That *The New Negro’s* biblicalization was intentional is further suggested by the ways it differs from its predecessor, the “Harlem number” of *Survey Graphic* that Locke also edited.<sup>25</sup> On one level, *The New Negro* departs from the *Survey* issue by downplaying any notion of Harlem as a materially and historically locatable space and time.<sup>26</sup> The “real” Harlem recedes in Locke’s anthology, while a different Harlem emerges: a mythopoetic time-space, or, in Joseph Allen Boone’s phrase, “a spatially realized spiritual goal” better suited to *The New Negro’s* sacred undertaking—as well as to its efforts to produce what is an essentially messianic temporality.<sup>27</sup> For according to a somewhat convoluted logic, the New Negro’s presence is felt throughout the anthology as both incipient and awaited, already in evidence but as yet unrealized: a Word not quite made flesh, even if its incarnation can be glimpsed in the arms of “The Brown Madonna” and in the promise of a Jean Toomer or a Langston Hughes.

This temporally ambivalent logic actually abets *The New Negro’s* messianism, since the literature of revelation always relies on a conjoining of imminence and deferral. Further, in proclaiming its subject as both brand-new and not quite, *The New Negro* aligns itself with what Joseph J. Murphy calls the historical “double meaning of African American theology,” according to which the “freedom promised in the scriptures . . . is ‘already but not yet.’”<sup>28</sup> Therein lies the rhetorical strength, as well as the frustrating limitation, of *The New Negro’s* thesis. The problem with its Good News is that it is still *only* prophetic; practically speaking, Locke’s volume continues to await the Chosen One, the real flesh-and-blood New Negro. The referent of the anthology’s title remains

protean and elusive, a lacuna at the core of its own biography, which itself remains a proleptic, provisional invocation of the New Negro's nativity.<sup>29</sup> *The New Negro* is a New Testament without (yet) a Christ, although it rhetorically makes its messiah's presence felt throughout. That presence is suggested so frequently—in the image of a brown Madonna's child, in the reiterated promise of certain young writers and talents, in the biblical parallels that its stories and poems rehearse—that many readers must have been sorely tempted, in 1925, to accept its glad tidings as an article of faith. Which, perhaps, is all they ever were.

### Apostasy of the Niggeratti

With his 1932 roman à clef *Infants of the Spring*, Wallace Thurman produced one of the most memorable satires of the Harlem Renaissance, of the politics behind *The New Negro*, and of a rebellious group of young Harlem writers and artists—the self-described “Niggeratti”—that included Richard Bruce Nugent, Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas, Zora Neale Hurston, and Thurman himself. One passage in particular, a blasphemous prayer meeting held at “Niggeratti Manor,” showcases the novel's determined irreverence both toward organized religion and toward the New Negro ethos promulgated by Locke's programmatic anthology:

Beloved, we join hands here to pray for gin. . . . Surely, God who let manna fall from the heavens so that the holy children of Israel might eat, will not let the equally holy children of Niggeratti Manor die from the want of a little gin. Children, let us pray. . . .

Father in heaven, we bend before thee. Hear, oh hear, our plea. Send us some gin, Lord, send us some gin. . . .

And, Lord, send me a little sandwich too. (102)

This passage evokes a Harlem altogether different than *The New Negro's* sanitized and mythopoeticized “promised land.” For one thing, Thurman anchors us in a specific, geographically locatable site—267 West 136<sup>th</sup> Street—a site, moreover, that provoked considerable consternation in older renaissance figures such as Locke and Du Bois. This is not the Harlem *The New Negro* wanted us to see; as J. Martin Favor has put it, “Thurman turns Harlem from an imagined site of redemption into a kind of sideshow.”<sup>30</sup>

Bruce Nugent's own novel *Gentleman Jigger*—written contemporaneously, for the most part, with Thurman's *Infants*, though not published until 2008—presents a very similar picture of the irreverent goings-on at Niggeratti Manor: “Everyone brags about their sins here. And then absolves themselves in gin.”<sup>31</sup> Not surprisingly, Locke's fictional counterparts in *Infants* and *Jigger* worry incessantly over this “decadent strain,” the tendency of the Niggeratti to “wallow in the mire of post-Victorian license” (*Infants*, 234).<sup>32</sup> Yet as Thurman memorably depicts it, “the first and last salon” that Locke organizes for the younger artists descends almost immediately into a babel of infighting and “blasphem[ies]” (234–35). “Pandemonium reigned,” Thurman writes, and the Miltonic echo is telling, for as Thurman recreates Babel he also restages another biblical narrative: the fall of the rebel angels (242). It is an apt metaphor for the renegade Niggeratti's renunciations of Locke's New Negro vision.

546 In *Gentleman Jigger* and *Infants of the Spring*, Nugent and Thurman exploit and send up that vision. Both novels feature black Christ figures prominently and unsubtly, and in a way that contrasts so stridently with Locke's project as to profane the entire New Negro enterprise. The character Paul Arbian—a fictional version of Nugent—gets to play the Christ role in Thurman's *Infants*, "aglow" as he is "with some inner incandescence" (44). In his letters, Paul announces himself as the messiah whose coming is foretold and inevitable: "Ignoring me will not appreciably delay my coming. It is written" (224). And in his extravagant self-sacrifice at novel's end, Arbian fulfills his role as the novel's half-baked Christ. Having covered the bathroom floor with his novel manuscript, he slashes his wrists with "a highly ornamented Chinese dirk," dying a martyr to decadent art; his friends will later discover the "colorful, inanimate corpse in a crimson streaked tub" (283).

In *Gentleman Jigger*, Nugent similarly casts himself as an aestheticized Christ. The "saintly-looking" Stuartt (Nugent's name in the novel) smiles "beatifically," exuding a "walking-on-the-waters attitude" (57, 138, 107). He likes on occasion to call himself God and to intone the words of the New Testament, sometimes verbatim—"by their works shall ye know them"—and other times in paraphrase: "But the blackest of these was Rusty" (66–67). The novel's more pertinent Christ figure, however, is Stuartt's brother and alter ego: Aeon, "the greatest of living American poets," a character clearly modeled after the real-life Jean Toomer (63). As in Winold Reiss's *New Negro* portrait of Toomer, "a halo was cast about his head"; in short, "the man *did* look like Jesus" (62). This figuration becomes increasingly satirical and surprisingly explicit, as Aeon finally "confesses" to his lover that he is in fact the Christ: "You see, Myra, as Jesus, it was the desire of God, my Father, that I, by my deaths, expiate the sins of the world" (151). One of these deaths occurs at the end of part 1 of *Gentleman Jigger*, as Aeon expires in a "terrible traffic accident"—but it remains unclear what sort of redemption, if any, he achieves (161). Whereas Locke's anthology casts Toomer as the most likely candidate for the messianic New Negro, Nugent makes Toomer a figure of the doomed, failed messiah—one more likely to be crushed by an oncoming car than to redeem his race through literature.

Likewise, while Thurman's novel cites Toomer as the *only* African American artist with "the elements of greatness," it also portrays him as one of the many "Negroes of talent [who] were wont to make one splurge, then sink into oblivion" (221, 62). Thurman's and Nugent's separate invocations of Toomer as the model, yet failed, Negro redeemer are particularly telling, because by the time *Infants of the Spring* was published, Toomer had not only apparently failed to make good on the promise he'd exhibited in *Cane* nearly a decade earlier; he had also repudiated any racial affiliation with "Negroes," let alone New Negroes. If he was to be a messiah, he wanted to herald the dawn not of a new day in the black race but of the new "American" race at whose coming he had already hinted in *Cane*. In their satirical treatments of Toomer, *Infants* and *Jigger* both participate in the tradition established by *The New Negro* of heralding *Cane*'s author as the One—but given all that had changed since 1925, their appropriations of Toomer take on a decidedly cynical flavor. By the early 1930s, these

novels suggest, the elusive New Negro had come to seem less "morning star" than dying star—and one that refused to be tethered to any racial program, let alone a sacred African American calling.<sup>33</sup> To adapt Houston Baker's influential terms, if *The New Negro* "mastered the form" of scriptural typology—exploiting biblical precedent in a calculated bid for cultural recognition—these novels work to "deform" that very mastery, denigrating and defiling the notion of an African American messiah.<sup>34</sup> What Locke tacitly exploits, Thurman and Nugent openly profane; where *The New Negro* plays black Christ, they play blaspheming trickster, "signifying" on the anthology's messianic program.

Locke's strategy may have been the stronger. The success of his endeavor at canon formation—and of that canon's ability to quash heretical counterdiscourses—can be measured by the relative popularity and availability in the decades since of *The New Negro* and of the Niggeratti's most notorious platform, the short-lived but incendiary magazine *Fire!!: A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists*.<sup>35</sup> *Fire!!*'s one and only issue was helmed by Thurman and published in 1926 with the intention, said Nugent, to "shock the hell out of them."<sup>36</sup> As Suzanne Churchill has observed, the "legend" of this periodical's radical assault on old-guard sensibilities obscures affinities between *Fire!!* and even such comparatively staid publications as Du Bois's *Crisis*.<sup>37</sup> Yet *Fire!!* was nonetheless plainly oppositional, both in intent and in its immediate reception. Locke, for one, proclaimed the magazine "a manoeuver of artistic secession," while in the pages of *Opportunity* Cullen obliged Thurman's desires by recognizing "a wish to shock in this first issue," predicting "that the wish will be well realized among the readers of *Fire*."<sup>38</sup>

This shock value has much to do with the magazine's brazen use of biblical and other Christian materials, a strategy that conspicuously recalls while also departing from Locke's *New Negro* strategies. *Fire!!* opens with a foreword that moves swiftly from demonic imagery to a "pagan" invocation of flesh and soul—and finally to a quotation from a Langston Hughes poem that mines the language and cadences of spirituals and of the black church:

FIRE . . . melting steel and iron bars, poking livid tongues between stone apertures and burning wooden opposition with a cackling chuckle of contempt.

FIRE . . . weaving vivid, hot designs upon an ebon bordered loom and satisfying pagan thirst for beauty unadorned . . . the flesh is sweet and real . . . the soul an inward flush of fire. . . . Beauty? . . . flesh on fire—on fire in the furnace of life blazing. . . .

"Fy-ah,  
Fy-ah, Lawd,  
Fy-ah gonna burn ma soul!"<sup>39</sup>

Hughes's lyric transvalues the preacher's traditional invocation of hellfire, which here metaphorizes a proudly heretical form of unabashed expression that rages against the "wooden opposition" of bourgeois cultures both black and white. Its "livid tongues" of flame connote a nexus of flesh and spirit that aptly conveys fire's figuration as the

548 element shared by the soul (fire's "inward flush") and the flesh ("on fire in the furnace of life blazing"). Surely, too, the writer of these lines had in mind Acts 2:3, in which the Holy Spirit descends on Christ's apostles in "tongues like as of fire." Far from the idealized, fleshless messiah invoked by *The New Negro*—with its emphasis on the soul, minus the body, of African America's new cultural dawn—the desire expressed in *Fire!!*'s foreword is to forge in some fiery smithy an uncreated amalgam of flesh, soul, spirit, and word.

Immediately following Hughes's hymn to "Fy-ah!" is Thurman's short story "Cordelia the Crude." The very title signals that such a story could not have found a home in *The New Negro*; it is indeed, as Thurman and Nugent intended it, something of "a shocker" (*Gentleman Jigger*, 31). "Physically, if not mentally," Thurman begins—already a suggestive opener—"Cordelia was a potential prostitute."<sup>40</sup> By story's end, that potential will become fully realized. The sixteen-year-old Cordelia's "wanton promiscuity," like *Fire!!* itself, burns with "the rebellious flame"—yet she discriminates enough, at least, to steer clear of "the bloated, lewd faced Jews" (5–6). So much for "Exodus strategies." Far from identifying with the Jew as a figure of mutual oppression, Cordelia, like the story that contains her, views the figure's otherness as absolute and unassimilable. "Cordelia the Crude" has no truck with *The New Negro*'s typological investments—either its invocations of Hebraic parallels or its more emphatic rewriting of those parallels to promote its Christ-like, messianic New Negro.

There is something else worth noting, though, about *The New Negro*'s anticipated black Christ and about *Fire!!*'s revisions of that figure. For while the tragic trope of the suffering black body as a crucified Christ has its own rich tradition in African American literature, Locke's anthology offers something very different: a sanitized, even bowdlerized Christological typology that quietly ignores this grim figuration.<sup>41</sup> The Lockean "New Negro" is essentially the black-Christ trope shorn of its negative valance, a fact nowhere more evident than in Locke's systematic pruning of lynching references from the anthology. Neither the word "lynching" nor any of its cognates appears in the volume's 450 pages: this at a time when lynching remained a persistent element of the United States' racial landscape and when some of *The New Negro*'s most celebrated contributors had already produced powerful literary documents of these atrocities.<sup>42</sup> Such portrayals were not what Locke needed for his anthology, which instead proffered the optimistic flipside to the Crucifixion trope—a trope that the self-styled Niggeratti would resurrect with insistent force in the years immediately following *The New Negro*'s publication.

Among *Fire!!*'s suite of ten poems, for example, Helene Johnson's "A Southern Road" depicts a lynched black body as the "sacrificial" offering at an altar to the "raff" of white supremacy.<sup>43</sup> Three of the other nine poems contain suggestive allusions to trees and to their occasionally strange fruit; Cullen's reference, for instance, to the "bursting fruit" that white Americans "reap" inevitably calls forth the similar imagery he invokes in *The Black Christ* (1929).<sup>44</sup> In an illustration for the January 1928 issue of *Opportunity*, Bruce Nugent would depict this connection in stark black and white, portraying a lynched body dangling below intersecting tree limbs that form an oblique yet unmistakable cross (fig. 3).<sup>45</sup> But no one more eagerly and provocatively reclaimed



▲  
Fig. 3. Richard Bruce Nugent, illustration for "Black Gum" by William V. Kelley. *Opportunity* 6, no. 1 (January 1928), 13.

the black Christ as an overtly politicized figure than *Fire!!* contributor and Niggeratti member Langston Hughes, author of such controversial poems as "Goodbye Christ" (1932) and "Christ in Alabama" (1931). Hughes thus makes for an apt figure to prepare *Fire!!*'s readers—via his prominently foregrounded poem "Fire"—for the varieties of New Negro sacrilege to follow. Like Thurman's and Nugent's romans à clef, Hughes's poem echoes the sacramental idiom of Locke's anthology. It sets a precedent, moreover, for the self-conscious emulation and revision of that idiom that *Fire!!* itself employs.

The magazine's concluding article is a striking case in point. Recalling with eerie precision the rhetorical strategies of *The New Negro*'s own concluding essay, Thurman's coda to the issue begins by invoking a "prophecy" he made "some time ago" and by offering that prediction's prophetic status as indeterminate: "So far my prophecy has failed to pan out, and superficially it seems as if it never will."<sup>46</sup> Thurman's prophecy—his very use of that term suggesting yet another ironic undercutting of his renaissance elders—has less to do with the future of race relations broadly considered, as in Du Bois, than with a foreseen vindication of Carl Van Vechten's 1926 novel *Nigger Heaven*. Like Du Bois, however, Thurman returns to the questionable status of his earlier prophecy only to offer it again with even greater confidence in his prognosticating prowess: "Thus I defiantly reiterate that a few years hence Mr. Van Vechten will be spoken of as a kindly gent rather than as a moral leper."<sup>47</sup> That *Fire!!* ends by rushing to the defense of a prominent renaissance patron newly vilified for his sensationalist depictions of black Harlem—as well as for manifesting that "decadent strain" that so worried Locke (*Infants*, 234)—testifies to the magazine's efforts "to shock the members of the older generation."<sup>48</sup>



of being sucked into it until there was a complete merging. For one brief moment I experienced supreme ecstasy" (45). The ecstatic experience of this "complete merging" signals a suspension of all distinctions and boundaries, an encounter with the divine or sacred—with "an immanent immensity, where there are neither separations nor limits," as Georges Bataille defines the sacred in his *Theory of Religion*.<sup>58</sup> The paradisiac, indeed explicitly biblical trappings of the Nugent character's reverie underscore the mystical sense of ecstasy as rapture, as spiritual transport to the sort of divine immanence Bataille describes. No separation, no limits: such a vision of the sacred accords aptly with the Niggeratti's rebel spirit.

The intricate interplay of "flesh" and "soul" in *Fire!!*'s foreword announces just such a denial of separations, as the sacred and the profane merge indissolubly "in the furnace of life blazing." Analogous mergings likewise recur in Thurman's fiction, and always in distinctly profane contexts that nonetheless give rise to a miraculous sense of plenitude, of oneness—of immanence, divine or otherwise. Witness the climactic rent party of *Infants of the Spring*, where "shouts of joy merged into one persistent noisy blare" (184, emphasis added)—or another rent party, this one at "a well known whore house" in *Fire!!*'s "Cordelia the Crude," where there arises "a chaotic riot of raucous noise and clashing color all rhythmically merging" (6, emphasis added). Here, as in *Infants*, the colors merge, with all racial (and sexual) distinctions becoming "completely eradicated. Whites and blacks clung passionately together as if trying to effect a permanent merger. Liquor, jazz music, and close physical contact had achieved what decades of propaganda had advocated with little success" (186). That this raucous party's "merger" miraculously outpaces the efforts of mundane propaganda highlights Niggeratti Manor's ritual and symbolic function as a space where boundaries and limits become porous, where sacred and profane, angelic and forbidden, are allowed to interpenetrate and meld.

It is, in the contexts of Christian mores and New Negro orthodoxy, a profanatory space that nonetheless functions as an appropriate setting for what Bernard Bell has called the "Afro-American canonical story": "the quest, frequently with apocalyptic undertones, for freedom, literacy, and wholeness."<sup>59</sup> The Niggeratti share, that is, the desire for the sacred that we see in *The New Negro*; their texts nonetheless betray far less reverent notions about how to get there. And although Locke's strategies have in some ways overshadowed and marginalized those of the Niggeratti, what is finally most impressive about the latter is precisely what they managed to articulate *from* the margins—from the heretical, blasphemous peripheries of orthodox discourses of racial uplift and aesthetic "purity." If the traditional scholarly equation of modernism and secularism has kept us from fully registering the rhetorical thrust of Locke's project, writers such as Nugent and Thurman saw it clearly and responded in kind—contesting not only the prevailing pieties of their time but also the received wisdom of our own.

552 **Notes**

I would like to thank Jeremy Braddock and George Hutchinson for their thoughtful responses to earlier drafts of this essay.

1. Locke appears to have provided the captions for Reiss's portraits, in response to a written request by Charles Boni Jr., dated October 21, 1925. See Alain L. Locke Papers, box 164–122, folder 12, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

2. Nugent's drawing comes from his *Salome* series, a sequence that also includes depictions of various other biblical figures. See *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*, ed. Thomas H. Wirth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), plates 1–7.

3. Marlon B. Ross, *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 87.

4. George Bornstein discusses the way Reiss's work "has been airbrushed out of [*The New Negro's*] successive reprints"—an erasure likely due to publishers' cost considerations—in *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 149–52.

5. William Stanley Braithwaite, "The Negro in American Literature," in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 44.

6. See Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 79; Arnold Rampersad, introduction to *The New Negro*, ix; Henry Louis Gates Jr., quoted in Michael Soto, "Teaching *The New Negro*," in *Teaching the Harlem Renaissance: Course Design and Classroom Strategies*, ed. Michael Soto (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 169; and Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), xviii.

7. Wallace Thurman, *Infants of the Spring* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 236. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

8. Alain Locke, introduction to *The New Negro*, 14.

9. Alain Locke, "Negro Youth Speaks," in *The New Negro*, 200.

10. Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 69, 67. Exodus strategies allowed black Americans both during and after slavery to assemble their own sacred notions of peoplehood in a process Werner Sollors calls "typological ethnogenesis" (*Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986], 57). See also Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

11. Charles S. Johnson, "The New Frontage on American Life," in *The New Negro*, 281.

12. Albert Barnes, "Negro Art and America," in *The New Negro*, 23.

13. Locke, "Negro Youth Speaks," in *The New Negro*, 47, 52; Locke, preface to *The New Negro*, xxvii; Locke, introduction, 4; Locke, "Negro Youth Speaks," 50.

14. Locke, "Negro Youth Speaks," 51, 49.

15. Granted its own special section ("Worlds of Color"), this concluding essay is also *The New Negro's* most sustained discussion of international politics and race relations, and an inherently prophetic one. As Gayatri Spivak writes, Du Bois's text "gives us the first taste of colonial discourse studies and even a preview of what was to follow from it—postcolonial criticism" (*Death of a Discipline* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2003], 97).

16. Du Bois, "The Negro Mind Reaches Out," in *The New Negro*, 386. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

17. Du Bois goes on to warn of the false religion of white-governed industry and empire, whose doctrine asserts "that white folk are a peculiar and chosen people" and whose "color hate easily assumes the form of a religion" (407). That religion's purveyors—the essay's Antichrists—assume responsibility for "the salvation of the world," but theirs is a perverted salvation achieved through colonial subjugation and coercion (410).

18. There is an "unintended irony," as George Hutchinson has observed, in Du Bois's invocation of Liberia as paradise: "For Du Bois, Liberia foretells African liberation. 'Tribal' Africans in Liberia might have told a different story" (*The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995], 432).

19. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Worlds of Color," *Foreign Affairs* 3, no. 3 (1925): 423. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

20. More precisely, Locke appears to have worked from a typescript currently catalogued under "Articles not known to have been published, 1900–1930." See Du Bois, "(World Racial Developments) / 1924 / Fragments," W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, series 3c, box 212, folder 20, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

21. Alain Locke, quoted in Leonard Harris and Charles Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 318.

22. Harris and Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke*, 211. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Du Bois, David Levering Lewis reaffirms Locke's version of events while also denigrating "The Negro Mind Reaches Out" as "a rehash of Du Bois's African travels." Lewis says nothing more about the essay, perhaps unmindful of the fact that it was a revised version of Du Bois's "Worlds of Color," which Lewis praises elsewhere (*W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963* [New York: Henry Holt, 2000], 162, 116).

23. For example, "the day faintly dawns"; "a vision of . . . a world greater, sweeter, more beautiful and more honest than ever before; a world without war," etc.; "I am glad it came. Even though it was a mirage it was eternally true. To-day some faint shadow of it comes to me again" (413).

24. Other examples include Locke's handling of Cullen's "Heritage," his unauthorized inclusion of excerpts from Toomer's *Cane*, and his equally unauthorized retitling of a McKay poem. See Jeremy Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), on "the strongly mediating character of Locke's editorial presence" (195). Locke's controversial retitling of McKay's "The White House" (as the more benign "White Houses") is well known, but "Locke was also an exacting editor of ['Heritage'], repeatedly returning Cullen's drafts for correction and revision. By the end of 1924, Cullen would pleadingly write to Locke for permission to cease his revisions" (185). As for Toomer's intended *New Negro* contribution, Locke rejected it in favor of the more ideologically useful *Cane* excerpts; see George Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 186.

25. George Hutchinson surveys some of the broad distinctions, including *The New Negro's* downplaying of "the Harlem focus" (*The Harlem Renaissance*, 396–97); see also Martha Jane Nadell, *Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race in American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 48–54. In *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), Barbara Foley has likewise demonstrated "the expunging of radicalism and the consolidation of nationalism—simultaneously Negro and American—in his creation of *The New Negro* out of its *Survey Graphic* predecessor" (198).

26. James Weldon Johnson's Harlem piece remains, but otherwise the word "Harlem" and all references to the place—"the city" or "the community," for example, phrases that recur in the *Graphic's* table of contents—drop out of *The New Negro's* titles. (Fisher's "City of Refuge" is an exception here—but Locke's own essay on Harlem from *Survey Graphic* is not included, W. A. Domingo's "The Tropics in New York" becomes "Gift of the Black Tropics," and Charles S. Johnson's "Black Workers and the City" becomes "The New Frontage on American Life.") Winthrop D. Lane's essay on "The Grim Side of Harlem" disappears altogether, as do Winold Reiss's "Harlem Types" and his distinctly profane "Interpretations of Jazz"—two impressionistic sketches of Harlem's raucous nightlife—and as do all of the Harlem photographs that appeared in *Survey*.

27. Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 221.

28. Joseph J. Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 153.

29. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. eloquently states the problem, the very notion of a New Negro was a "culturally willed myth. . . . [J]ust as *utopia* signifies 'no-place,' so does 'New Negro' signify a 'black person who lives at no place,' and at no time. It is a bold and audacious act of language, signifying the will to power, to dare to recreate a race by renaming it. . . . [The New Negro] does not exist as an entity or group of entities but 'only' as a coded system of signs, complete with masks and mythology" ("The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* 24 [Fall 1988]: 132–35).

30. J. Martin Favor, "George Schuyler and Wallace Thurman: Two Satirists of the Harlem Renaissance," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. George Hutchinson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 206.

31. Richard Bruce Nugent, *Gentleman Jigger: A Novel of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Thomas H. Wirth (Philadelphia: Da Capo, 2008), 95. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

32. Locke himself duly expressed this concern in his published review of Thurman's novel, lamenting that "the attitudes and foibles of Nordic decadence have been carried into the buds of racial expression" ("Black Truth and Black Beauty: A Retrospective Review of the Literature of the Negro for 1932," *Opportunity* 11, no. 1 [1933]: 16).

33. *Gentleman Jigger* takes the implicit commentary a step further by making its Toomer character, Aeon, so light-skinned that he in fact "passes" with great success, writing "Negro poetry" as a visually and socially white man (64).

34. Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 15. By satirizing *The New Negro's* cagey scriptural investments and the barely muted messianism of its titular figure, Thurman and Nugent "advertis[e]" (as Baker says of such "deformers") their "unabashed *badness*" (50, emphasis in original).

35. Michael L. Cobb, for example, has remarked the seemingly inexplicable exclusion of *Fire!!*'s most noteworthy text, Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade"—and even of any editorial mention—from the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* ("Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative: The Harlem Renaissance's Impolite Queers," *Callaloo* 23, no. 1 [2000]: 329).

36. Bruce Nugent, quoted in Tyler T. Schmidt, "'In the Glad Flesh of My Fear': Corporeal Inscriptions in Richard Bruce Nugent's *Geisha Man*," *African American Review* 40, no. 1 (2006): 161.

37. Suzanne W. Churchill et al., "Youth Culture in *The Crisis* and *Fire!!*," *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 66.

38. Alain Locke, "Fire: A Negro Magazine," *Survey* 58, nos. 10–12 (1927): 563; Countee Cullen [unsigned], "The Dark Tower," *Opportunity* 5, no. 1 (1927): 25. Though himself a *Fire!!* contributor, Cullen was by no means wholly simpatico with the Niggeratti.

39. Wallace Thurman, ed., *Fire!!* 1, no. 1 (1926): 1, ellipses in original.

40. Wallace Thurman, "Cordelia the Crude," *Fire!!* 1, no. 1 (1926): 5. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

41. On the black Christ, see Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 592–626.

42. Had Locke had only literary merit in mind when selecting the poetry for his anthology, after all, he would surely have included Jean Toomer's searing "Portrait in Georgia" (1923)—a poem whose connotations of sacrificial violence and more subtle suggestion of lynching as Crucifixion made it an impossible candidate for inclusion in *The New Negro*. Nor did Locke make room for one of Claude McKay's best-known poems, "The Lynching" (1922) (with its more overt allusions to the Crucifixion) or for Countee Cullen's "Christ Recrucified" (1922).

43. Helene Johnson, "A Southern Road," *Fire!!* 1, no. 1 (1926): 17.

44. Countee Cullen, "From the Dark Tower," *Fire!!* 1, no. 1 (1926): 16.

45. Caroline Goesser offers this interpretation in her book *Picturing the New Negro: Harlem Renaissance Print Culture and Modern Black Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 236.

46. Wallace Thurman, "Fire Burns," *Fire!!* 1, no. 1 (1926): 47.

47. Thurman, "Fire Burns," 47.

48. Amritjit Singh, foreword to *Infants*, xi. In a 1926 review in the *Crisis*, Du Bois memorably dismissed *Nigger Heaven* as "a blow in the face"—nothing but "gin and sadism," and "one damned orgy after another"—which rather echoes Locke's characterization of *Infants of the Spring* as just another of Thurman's "prolonged orgies of exhibitionism" ("On Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*," in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis [New York: Henry Holt, 1995], 516–17); Locke, unpublished review, Alain L. Locke Papers, box 164–134, folder 17.

49. Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 252.

50. Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, 254.

51. Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, 284.

52. Ross, *Manning the Race*, 417.

53. Nugent, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” *Fire!!* 1, no. 1 (1926): 38, ellipses in original.

54. Indeed, the transgressions of “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” lie partly *in* its modernism and in what it makes modernism *do*. See David A. Gerstner, *Queer Pollen: White Seduction, Black Male Homosexuality, and the Cinematic* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 45.

55. The apostle John is a special favorite, “the beloved”—yet Nugent presents the real love story as taking place between Jesus and Judas, “so alike in thought and desire were they” (Nugent, “Tree with Kerioth-Fruit,” in *Gay Rebel*, 143). Jesus gives John much of his “affection,” true; “but Judas, Jesus knew” (143). Whether the word “knew” here is meant to operate in the biblical sense is not perfectly clear—but these are Bible stories, after all.

56. Locke, “Fire,” 563.

57. See Monica L. Miller, “The Black Dandy as Bad Modernist,” in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 179–205.

58. Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 42.

59. Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 341–42.