Beauty along the Color Line: Lynching, Aesthetics, and the *Crisis*

RUSS CASTRONOVO

In memory of Nellie McKay

"IN AESTHETIC THEORY AND CRITICISM, THE NEGRO HAS NOT YET made any worth-while contribution," announced the *Crisis* of September 1924 (Braithwaite 207). This statement ignored the history of the *Crisis* itself, which almost from its inception had examined the status of the beautiful in relation to social justice. With columns like "Music and Art," which often ran side by side with a section titled "Lynching," the *Crisis* staged monthly confrontations between aesthetics and black print culture. The inclusion of artwork and news about black artistic achievements no doubt worked to embellish a journal that chronicled and fought against black victimization. The effects worked the other way, too: with each issue, aesthetics was retheorized so that beauty no longer appeared as an ideal beyond practical purpose but was instead revealed as a formal matter saturated by the historical content of racial atrocity. At a time when some black intellectuals found safe harbor in the doctrine of art for art's sake, the *Crisis* as an agent of black print culture pushed a confrontational aesthetics that revalued traditional categories of the beautiful.

W. E. B. DuBois sought to correct for deficiencies in aesthetic theory and criticism by inviting Countee Cullen, Jessie Fauset, and other prominent figures in publishing to participate in a forum about race and aesthetics. Dissatisfied with the responses he received, DuBois took matters into his own hands, using the *Crisis* to develop an uncompromising aesthetic theory. The result—his 1926 provocation entitled "Criteria of Negro Art"—culminates in the equation of art to a political tool, famously defining art as propaganda. To observers at the time, such as Claude McKay, who wrote DuBois that "nowhere in your

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writings do you reveal any comprehension of esthetics and therefore you are not competent nor qualified to pass judgment upon any work of art," the editor of the *Crisis* had approached art using the subtlety of an ideological jackhammer (DuBois, *Correspondence* 375). To readers since, DuBois's prescription has seemed old-fashioned, constrained by a party line of culture that slighted black vernacular expression in order to demand, as Darwin Turner puts it, a single "standard for all blacks—at least for all cultivated blacks" (53).

But when DuBois declared propaganda as the criterion of African American art, he did not insist that art be created in strict accord to some preexisting cultural orthodoxy. What matters instead is the instrumentality of beauty for political confrontation. This approach uses aesthetics to redefine propaganda, which in both DuBois's day and ours tends to be discredited because of its overt ideological imperatives. As an endeavor "ever bounded by Truth and Justice," to use the lofty description of "Beauty" in the *Crisis*, aesthetics overhauls propaganda so that it no longer connotes vulgar partisanship but rather operates as "the one great vehicle of universal understanding." Aesthetics makes propaganda true by framing the concept with the history of race in ways that people, including white people, are compelled to recognize. Beauty is not a matter of perception but an arena for crafting hegemony. "All Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists," DuBois explains. "I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda." And it is high time that black intellectuals develop an aesthetic theory that encourages expropriation: "But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent" ("Criteria" 757). This pronouncement seems muddled: how can "all Art" already be propaganda while "any art" has the potential to be propaganda? The answer lies in the difference between "Art" and "art." Whereas "Art" implies the cultural validation of unassailable tradition, "art," a much more ductile category, does not abide prescribed judgments and instead contests the universality of such judgments.

DuBois was led to these rather fine and orthographic distinctions from his work with the *Crisis* that allowed him to experiment with the political uses of formalism. Starting with his 1926 manifesto and reading in reverse chronological order every issue of the *Crisis* to its first issue in 1910, I have attempted to re-create a critical narrative that traces the development of an aesthetic theory among African American writers associated with the NAACP's national magazine. Month after month, the *Crisis* assembled short notices about black achievements in painting, music, and sculpture as evidence of racial uplift. But any smooth tracing out of this narrative is interrupted issue after issue by the ghastly reporting of lynchings, which make attention to beauty seem misguided at best and frivolous at worst. Had not James Weldon Johnson already written about beauty and racial consciousness only to end with a renunciation of aesthetics? Johnson's ex–colored man seeks to ennoble black life by expressing "all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro, in classic musical form" (474). As he collects material from the Deep South, the ex–colored man is poised to fuse race to aesthetic form, implying that African American identity, like music, can be arranged—and rearranged—into universally pleasing compositions that transcend the provinciality of racism. But a spectacle lynching derails his goal of aesthetic reclamation. Frightened and ashamed, he boxes up his research and decides to pass as white, turning his back on art and rejecting his racial heritage. Black life cannot be made over into the classic form of "universal art" when its content is infused with the racialized specifics of murder (472).

Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex–Colored Man* suggests the difficulties facing DuBois and his colleagues at the *Crisis* as they attempted

to articulate an alternative aesthetics whose principal criterion centered on propaganda. Johnson's novel also indicates the ethical difficulty that my essay's association of beauty and lynching poses. DuBois argues for the necessity of this disturbing conjunction because of his belief that aesthetics, as a broad endeavor that includes propaganda, counteracts the narrowness of spectacle violence. Surveying the early history of this monthly magazine, I uncover an aesthetic theory that locates beauty at a site of crisis where violence is aestheticized even as aesthetic formalism is linked to social transformation. If "literary form itself," as Elizabeth Maddock Dillon writes, "can speak . . . of the creation and distribution of political power" (67), DuBois's interest in aesthetics speaks volumes about how specific content—particularly African American personhood—often fails to meet putatively universal criteria that underwrite justice. By attending to form in an era of lynching, DuBois rearticulated the initial delimitations of the beautiful, whose abstract parameters disallowed black lives from having merit in both the national sphere and international settings of colonization.

Although DuBois's "militant journalism," according to David Levering Lewis, clearly follows in the tradition of Frederick Douglass's *North Star*, the intellectual inheritance linking African Americans to aesthetics seems tenuous if not strained (410). Aesthetic philosophy could be downright hostile, stipulating that general precepts about beauty always met their limit in blackness, the Negro, or Africa (Kant 78; Burke 144; Ruskin, *Political Economy* 122). For a people that DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* defined as the "problem" of the twentieth century (34), the eighteenth-century neologism *aesthetics* seemed a long way off. But by starting with the *Crisis* and moving outward to consider black writers' engagement of art and propaganda, including DuBois's own novelistic examples, I will bring an alternative aesthetics into focus. The problem is that other issues—most notably the aestheticized violence of lynching—enter the frame as well. This friction led to DuBois's experiment with propaganda in defiance of colleagues at the *Crisis* who did not feel comfortable with such overt politicization. As I ultimately argue, DuBois reacted by pushing his agenda even more strenuously, trying to wring an activist methodology out of aesthetic formalism.

Aesthetics versus Art

In rearticulating the beautiful, staffers at the *Crisis* walked dangerous ground, trying to recuperate forms of representation that had done so much injury to black people. Worse still, they risked their own irrelevance, opening themselves to the accusation that effeminate dabbling in art did little to abate black victimization. At the forefront of the crusade for federal antilynching legislation, the *Crisis*—as the urgency of its name suggested—had little use for racial accommodation. This stance set it apart from competing African American monthly magazines, which owed allegiance to Booker T. Washington and routinely attacked the *Crisis*.[1] At the helm, DuBois stood for nothing less than "reshaping a race's image of itself, and . . . serving a resounding notice to white people of a New Negro in the making" (Lewis 424). Through it all, the belief that beauty was instrumental to social justice remained a poignant chord in the writings of DuBois and other *Crisis* regulars including Walter White and Fauset. Their principled stand recruited new subscribers in droves, to the alarm of the Tuskegee machine: after selling out the inaugural issue of 1,000 copies, DuBois increased the print run to 2,500 for the December 1910 issue, and by April 1912 distribution was at 22,500 (Lewis 413–16).

Each month the *Crisis* ran "Along the Color Line," a section featuring notices about both black achievements and victimization, which taken together served as a record of racial progress—or lack thereof—at home and

abroad. Grouped under the headings "Education" and "Music and Art," these snippets documented the importance of intellectual and aesthetic uplift. Yet categories such as "Crime" and "Lynching" offset these encouraging signs in the battle against discrimination. The banner for "Along the Color Line" remained the same issue after issue: rows of corpses stretch into the distance, the horizon broken only by a corpulent white figure, an allegory of mob "justice," who holds fast the ropes that strangle human beings (see fig. opposite). The February 1914 *Crisis* exemplifies the antagonistic confrontation between aesthetics and murderous ugliness. While "Music and Art" applauds "the ease and freedom" of a black tenor's performance and acclaims a "beautiful flower garden" cultivated by another "colored citizen," the column "Crime" records that David Lee "was lynched" by "a dozen masked men" and that Mary Marshall narrowly escaped a lynch mob after she "kill[ed] a white boy under provocation" ("Music and Art"; "Crime"). The layout of the *Crisis* illustrates that "Music and Art" is always positioned against other forms of black life and against death. Art does not exist for art's sake when aesthetic categories remain adjacent to columns of crime and acts of injustice, especially murder. Art always exists for the sake of something else. To assert otherwise, to claim that art exists for autonomous purposes, would be to give art a freedom that the American world denies its citizens.

The placement of beauty along the color line at first seems to follow the dictates of Anglo-American aesthetics. William Morris, for instance, imbued beauty with democratic potential by identifying art as "the solace of oppressed nations" (9). Yet ideas of beauty as compensation for defeat hardly seem consistent with DuBois's activist sense of art as embattled in the everyday materiality of racial life. A generation earlier, John Ruskin, for his part, had allowed that "beauty . . . [might] be sought for in the forms which we associate with our every-day life," but he strictly limited this search to "the drawing-room" ("Lamp" 124). Johnson's ex–colored man betrays how adherence to such criteria traduces racial consciousness when he likens his son, who knows nothing of his bloodline, to "a little golden-headed god, with a face and head that would have delighted the heart of an old Italian master" (510). The ex–colored man literally reproduces European classicism as racial amnesia. For writers who imbibed these precepts, the task was difficult and the payoff dubious, as Nathan Huggins first argued: "The black artist had to convince himself that he had something to say worth saying, and that he had the skill to say it; then he had to defy the white eyes which were too often his eyes as well. All so that he could end with a work of art" (199). Traditions of Anglo-American aesthetics, it would seem, fold art back on itself, so that it is never positioned among other historical categories.

DuBois's innovation was to see this fold as a tear in aesthetic formalism. Just as the orthographic distinction between "Art" and "art" alludes to his nuanced dissent from Anglo-American aesthetics, so too the juxtaposition of beauty with lynching in the *Crisis* bespeaks the impossibility of cordoning off the beautiful from racial content. Formalism, in effect, is never as formal as it pretends to be; it is always a historical category. If, however, beauty seems removed from historical striving, it can provoke self-doubt, leading race men and women to wonder, "After all, what have we who are slaves and blacks to do with Art?" ("Criteria" 752). Plenty, would be DuBois's response. DuBois could answer so sharply because art—much of it specious and injurious—had already done so much to slaves and blacks. Doing with as opposed to done to: the difference between transformative use and passive receipt of art lies in an interventionist methodology that examines aesthetic formalism as debatable ground on which judgments are made, criteria established as universal,

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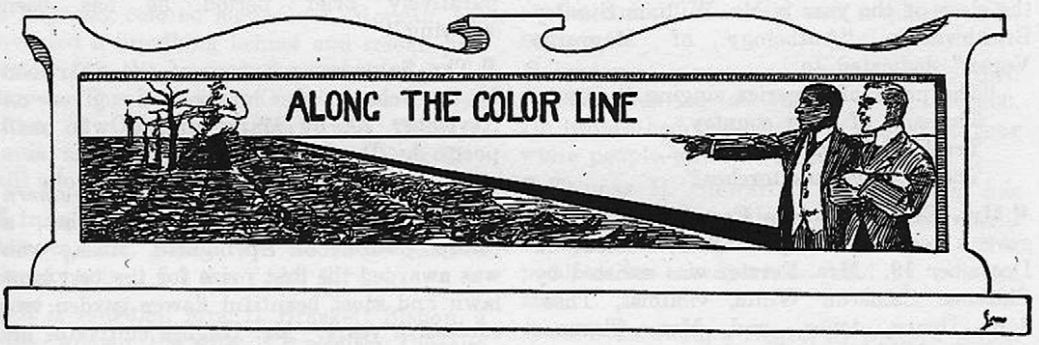

MUSIC AND ART.

AT the annual meeting of St. George's Club, of New York, Mr. Harry T. Burleigh, the distinguished baritone-composer of New York, in recognition of his twenty years' service as baritone soloist of St. George's Episcopal Church, was presented with a Tiffany watch bearing the inscription: "The Brotherhood of Men to Harry T. Burleigh, as a token of esteem from his fellow members of St. George's Club, November 29, 1913." The presentation was made by the rector, the Rev. Karl Reiland.

¶ The program for the series of artists' recitals which the Washington Conservatory of Music (Mrs. Harriet Gibbs Marshall, director) undertakes annually in Washington, D. C., at the Howard Theatre, began on December 13, when Mrs. Marjorie Groves Robinson, pianist, and Mr. William Speights, tenor, were heard in piano and song recital. Among their selections were numbers by Clarence Cameron White, Rosamond Johnson, Will Marion Cook and Coleridge-Taylor. Miss Beatrice Lewis was the accompanist. Mrs. Robinson and Mr. Speights are both graduates of the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, and have lately joined the faculty of the Washington Conservatory. The concert series for 1914 will include a concert by the Conservatory Folk Song Singers in January, a lecture recital by Mrs. Maud Cuney Hare, pianist, assisted by Mr. William H. Richardson, baritone, in February, and a comic opera to be presented by Mr. Speights in March.

¶ A series of five recitals on folk songs, folklore and folk dances in costume have been presented at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences by Mrs. Alexina Carter-Barrell, an American singer of Boston, Mass. Negro and Creole folk songs were given on December 3. Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois was the lecturer; Mrs. Barrell, soprano; Mellville Charlton, organist; Walter Craig, violinist, and Henry L. Jeter, violoncellist, with Mrs. Dora Cole Norman, solo dancer. On December 10 an Indian and Mexican program was presented, with the addition of Miss Lucille Perry Hall as solo dancer.

¶ On December 14 Mr. Julian F. Adger, organist, gave an organ recital under the auspices of the Philadelphia Organists' Alliance, at Cherry Memorial Church, Philadelphia, Pa. The assisting artists were Miss Blanche Williams, soprano, and Miss Elizabeth Benson, pianist.

¶ On December 29 the Philadelphia Concert Orchestra gave the first of a series of concerts for the season 1913-1914, at Philadelphia. The soloist was Miss Lydia C. McClane, soprano, of Philadelphia. The orchestra, which is in its ninth season, is the first incorporated colored symphony orchestra in the United States.

¶ Mr. T. Theo Taylor, pianist, and Mr. Harrison Emanuel, violinist, of Chicago, Ill., were heard in a joint recital on November 20, at Springfield, Ill.

¶ Cloyd Boykin, the artist of Boston, Mass., sailed on November 29 for London. Mr.

and hegemony treated as the common sense of the majority.

The sticking point in this assertion about DuBois's radical aesthetics is his finicky attitude toward new and popular art. The *Crisis* under his leadership "hardly concealed its disdain for jazz, the blues, and the popular gospel song . . . [and] seldom questioned the artistic criteria of the white world" (Rampersad, *Art* 188). It would be pointless to explain away DuBois's parochial tastes just as it would be disingenuous to pretend that his literary efforts are not "dated" and "bombastic" (Rampersad, Foreword 5 and *Art* 126). In contrast to his pronouncement that the color line is the problem of the twentieth century, DuBois's artistic productions seem stuck in the Victorianism of the nineteenth. But to accept this judgment is not to surrender the terrain of aesthetics. Only by using propaganda to cut a distinction between art and aesthetics can DuBois ask, what does art do to people, and what can people do with art?

Construed as a political discourse about form, aesthetics theorizes what art does: the subjects it creates and limits, the analyses it forecloses and enables, and the justice it promises and the injustice it legitimates. Propaganda, above all, represents an aesthetic concern about the form politics should take. Enabling distinctions between art and aesthetics, propaganda does not separate these two densely intertwined categories so much as turn the tables on their relation to imagine different criteria that give primacy to aesthetics, usually a second-order discourse, as a field of investigation devoted to understanding art as one historical form among the many forms—legal, national, gendered—that constitute social possibilities and political horizons. Instead of attempting to unlock the meaning of an artwork, aesthetics probes the initial exclusions, effects, and uses of form. While the stilted aspect of DuBois's fiction did little to trouble established standards of representation and, in fact, probably confirmed New England ideals of refinement, his concern with aesthetic formalism strikes at assumptions about art's role as disinterested and socially irrelevant.

If his artistic tastes never shed certain niceties, DuBois's politics also never strayed too far from what Adolph Reed identifies as a mode of "inquiry linked to strategic action" (177). Reed identifies such inquiry as antiaesthetic, contending that DuBois's political vision was unclouded by literature or idealistic philosophy. This assessment hinges on a rigid disciplinarity that upholds politics as "an autonomous domain of social activity" that, as far as Reed is concerned, is thankfully immune to literary hermeneutics, which is often nothing other than an empty exercise in "formalist aestheticism" (130, 150). Neither formalism nor aesthetics, however, is as formal or as historically empty as assumed: the content of aesthetic form is a political matter that entails asking how the aesthetic field is delimited and defined in the first place. This recognition offers insight into the unequal relations that structure not only art but also any field (such as politics) or endeavor (such as justice) that relies on formal criteria. By disentangling art and aesthetics, DuBois steps outside categories of the beautiful to consider art's uses and effects.

By foregrounding issues of placement—where does "Music and Art" belong in relation to "Lynching"?—the *Crisis* mapped aesthetic theory onto a geography of racial difference. The journal featured a multimedia format made possible by advances in halftone reproduction that allowed for cheap and easy combination of lynching photographs, illustrations by black artists, and editorials about political action (Carroll 89). Print culture brought DuBois to the radical edge of Kantian critique by revealing the contingency of form in terms of its historically composite nature. The subject, according to Kant, "judges not merely for himself, but for everyone" by adopting a perspective that everyone

else is presumed to already share (47). Hannah Arendt discerns deep political significance in this axiom, as aesthetic judgment rouses "the fundamental abilities of man as a political being" who "orient[s] himself in the public realm, in the common world" (*Between Past* 221). But to say that individual judgment prepares the ground of collective sensibility—what Kant labels *sensus communis* (sec. 19)—does not put the case strongly enough. Aesthetic judgment requires obligation, decreeing a shared sensibility for all people. This strenuous discourse that tells people to agree with universal feeling is redeployed in DuBois's instruction to *his* people that "until the art of the black folk compells recognition they will not be rated as human" ("Criteria" 759). His word for this instruction, of course, was *propaganda*. By connecting propaganda to aesthetic judgment, DuBois reactivates the the beautiful as a democratic imperative to revise the forms that encompass what the *Crisis* each month identified as "the darker races."

Aestheticizing Violence

The decades that witnessed the greatest toll of black victims at "the hands of persons unknown" also saw a flurry of academic research to codify beauty as an aesthetic science. Educators sought to establish psychological links between the perception of beauty and the capacity for ethical behavior. More difficult to establish is a relation between beauty and lynching. Would a critic be so incautious as to stretch the limits of political good taste by associating ritualized murder with the philosophical discourse of aesthetics? DuBois took this chance because the linkage of beauty and lynching provided an analysis of white injustice and a means of countering such ugliness.

As university research grounded the Kantian project in psychology, theories of universal taste stumbled against "the darker races," whose specific history seemed far removed from the vague generalities of *sensus communis*. Beauty and lynch law exist at different ends of the color line, each appealing to justice either as imminent in a formal world where individual difference does not signify before more global concerns about proportion, symmetry, and purity or as long deferred in a world so out of proportion that human beings are burned alive. At the same time, aestheticized representations of racial subjects cannot be held apart from the history of lynching. "Rituals of aggression and negation" remain even today the inevitable context of "beautiful black male bodies," according to Kobena Mercer (191–92). These comments, made on looking at Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, stem from a history in which the two ends of the color line—lynching and beauty—meet up in spectacles of violence. Lynching and beauty can be examined together only through a politicized methodology—might we use the term *propaganda*?—that takes aim at national criteria that evaluate white violence as though it were a work of art.

Activists working for the NAACP experimented with this sort of methodology, debating the extent to which beauty could facilitate visions of a just world. The risks of the experiment were by no means incidental: in the face of mounting statistics that "on the average a black man, woman, or child was murdered nearly once a week, every week, between 1882 and 1930 by a hate-driven white mob," an aesthetic strategy seemed not only implausible but dangerous by legitimating a turn away from ugly social realities terrorizing black populations (Tolnay and Beck ix).[2] Even worse, such a solution could aestheticize the violence that was the mainstay of that terror. DuBois's undertaking at the *Crisis* required vigilance lest "Music and Art" beautify violence, making murder seem a thing of common sense. Writing in the context of a different terror, Walter Benjamin in his famous artwork essay would pinpoint this danger as an aestheticization that makes destruction beautiful. In an artwork essay of his own, DuBois seeks

criteria that will differentiate between an outlook that aestheticizes racism and one that uses "Beauty to set the world right" ("Criteria" 754), a distinction that Benjamin would later reproduce as the difference between the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of aesthetics. Benjamin attempted to hold the line between the two by, on the one hand, valorizing the role of communism in "politicizing art" and, on the other, denouncing aesthetic politics as the watchword of fascism (242). DuBois faced a very different task, if only because the repressive aspects of American culture remained fused to a liberal ideology of rights, not to rigid state control. Unable to draw neat distinctions, he conflated aesthetics and politics by imagining the possibility of doing something political with art. The payoff was small and the risks enormous since the media in the United States had no qualms about doing something aesthetic with politics by presenting African American dehumanization as a source of white pleasure. The market never can stock enough "Uncle Toms, Topsies, good 'darkies' and clowns" ("Criteria" 755). Too plainly, the campaign of extralegal terror against black people, promoted by literature such as Thomas Dixon's romances of the Klan, justified in film by D. W. Griffith, and accepted by the mainstream press, was in accord with national taste.

DuBois felt sufficiently dogged by these pitfalls to begin his artwork essay by ventriloquizing the concerns of those who doubted the usefulness of drawing methodological links between efforts to create beauty and protests demanding respect for blacks as citizens and human beings. He wondered:

> How is it that an organization like this [the NAACP], a group of radicals trying to bring new things into the world, a fighting organization which has come up out of the blood and dust of battle, struggling for the right of black men to be ordinary human beings—how is it that an organization of this kind can turn aside to talk about Art? ("Criteria" 752)

No great leap was needed to imagine this antiaesthetic position because DuBois and his comrades at the *Crisis* had long asked such questions of themselves. In its more sanguine moments, the *Crisis* would make the case that a turn to aesthetics as a discourse "about Art" was never an evasion but rather a mode of confrontation. But optimism was often difficult to come by, and DuBois, White, and Fauset frequently asked when beauty had ever stopped a lynching. Did not the aesthetic aspects of lynching itself—its cruel drama, ritual orchestration, and spectacle—invalidate political aesthetics even before it got under way?

The aesthetic dimension of lynching comes through in the work of historians who describe the systematic persecution of blacks as "theater," "festival," and stage show (Dray xii, 77; Tolnay and Beck). In a haunting collection of picture postcards of lynchings, James Allen confronts the grisly aesthetic of torture. Likening the photographic record of strung-up bodies to images in the tradition of *nature morte*, which typically displayed fruit or game for viewers' pleasure, Allen implies how visual art played an important role in commercializing atrocity.[3] Connecting the troubling aesthetics of violence to classical representation, Michael Hatt reads a photograph of one lynching victim as a "grotesque parody of Parmigianino's *Vision of St. Jerome*," the twisted, murdered body an eerie citation of the saint's posture (81). The spectacular nature of racial persecution established lynching as public art, what Philip Dray calls a "'folk pornography' that made for welcome, titillating reading" in the morning newspaper (4). Macabre orchestrations of mob injustice render murder fit for public consumption. In his disquieting book *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*, Dray refuses to shrink from these aesthetic aspects when discussing the spectacle lynching of Henry Smith before ten thousand people in 1893. As Smith was being returned to the scene of his alleged crime, the train stopped in Texarkana, and the crowd

urged that the lynching take place then and there. If not for the intervention of Paris's leading citizens, including the district attorney, to ensure Smith's safe passage to his murder, the community would have forfeited its "right to stage and enjoy its own lynching" (77).

Newspapers that publicized the time when a lynching would take place, special trains scheduled to shuttle white folk from the countryside to the event, and the crowds that gathered made racial horror a grotesque distortion of *sensus communis*. As an aesthetic object, the victimized black body becomes the focal point of white subjectivity. Lynching's performative nature produces a drama of white community that, as Hatt argues, erases potential class antagonisms among whites. In short, the collective nature of aesthetic judgment that Arendt defines as crucial to the shared endeavor of political life becomes the terrible standard of white community (*Lectures*). The Kantian subject who feels that he or she ought to agree with presupposed tastes (sec. 22) reappears in monstrous guise at lynchings, where many spectators reportedly felt unable to turn away. "I was fixed to the spot where I stood, powerless to take my eyes from what I did not want to see," confesses the ex–colored man of his behavior at a Georgia lynching. "It was over before I realized that time had elapsed" (Johnson 497). The ex–colored man only extricates himself afterward, the retrospection of his telling separating him from the crowd. Arendt's account of spectatorship describes his situation: "Spectators exist only in the plural. The spectator is not involved in the act, but he is always involved with fellow spectators. . . . [T]he faculty they have in common is the faculty of judgment" (*Lectures* 63). The ex–colored man's experience puts a horrific twist on Arendt's portrait of public viewing: judgment is exactly what the lynchers have in common, their decision that a black person must die a public death providing confirmation of their social cohesion as white people.

Difficult as it is to say, lynching was an aesthetic performance. This point is driven home by *New York Times* coverage of the lynching of Will Porter in a Kentucky opera house in 1911. After he shot and killed a white man, Porter was hauled off to the city jail. Suspecting that a mob would overrun the jail, the city marshal hid his prisoner beneath an opera-house stage. The mob tracked Porter there and quickly hit on the idea of executing him on stage. Turning on the house lights and setting their captive before props and scenery, the mob "silhouetted against the theatre walls" fired two hundred bullets into Porter's body. The *Times* made the most of the event's aesthetic possibilities, describing the lynching as a "melodrama" that was "staged" in front of an "audience of half a hundred determined avengers." When the performance was over, "the lights were extinguished, the curtain lowered, and the mob then filed out" ("Lynched"). Dramatic sensibilities lend order to the scene, giving this revenge play closure and organizing the mob into an audience. By the next day's edition, the *Times*'s sarcasm had soured the aesthetics of lynching: "Whatever else may be said about the inhabitants of Livermore, Ky., it cannot be denied that in them the dramatic sense is strongly developed. For, when they deemed it expedient to lynch a negro, they managed to do the familiar deed in a way not only entirely new, but highly picturesque" ("Topics"). Aestheticization revealed that beauty and art could not be trusted in the campaign against white injustice. Too easily, the "picturesque" nature of violence overshadowed the reality of Porter's death, so that murder became melodrama.

The sheer fact that the *Times* could describe lynching, no matter how mockingly, as theatrical spectacle suggests the urgency of a politicized aesthetics. Where DuBois supplied "criteria of Negro art," Walter White's exposé of lynching offers a scathing corollary that might be entitled "Criteria of White Southern Art." Although White never organized

his findings into a bold treatise on the scale of DuBois's artwork essay, he explained the mutilation and murder of blacks as fulfilling aesthetic criteria common to rural backwaters of the South. As assistant secretary of the NAACP, White used his light skin to pose as a white newspaper reporter covering a 1919 campaign of terror against black sharecroppers in Arkansas that left, by NAACP estimates, at least two hundred dead.[4] His investigations led to *Rope and Faggot*, a 1929 psychosocial study that diagnosed the public shooting, hanging, and burning of black people as an instinctive aesthetic response among poor southern whites. Just as researchers in United States universities theorized the appeal of the beautiful as psychological instinct, White drew on cultural psychology to explain why lynching seizes white imaginations. For the white subject of the unindustrialized South, lynching provides pleasure by interrupting the uneventfulness of small-town life. Literature underwrites White's study of white interiority: the "leaden colours" that Sinclair Lewis used to depict Midwest life seem a chromatic explosion when set against the "endless routine of drab working-hours and more drab home life" of the "average small town in the South." In the absence of "the merry-go-round, the theatre, the symphony orchestra," lynching satisfies an instinctual "human love for excitement" (9). Lynching fills the void of aesthetic pleasure and, in the process, becomes less a surrogate for amusement than an aesthetic activity in its own right.

Years later, DuBois supported the idea of white art as injurious to black people by attributing "the increase in lynching in 1915" to *Birth of a Nation* (*Dusk* 240). The peak soon leveled off, according to White. But while *Rope and Faggot* contends that lynchings declined somewhat in the 1920s, the savagery of the mob intensified. "[H]uman love for excitement" made lynching still more ghastly: "Against this gratifying decrease in number of victims is the greatly aggravated brutality, often extending to almost unbelievable torture of the victim, which has marked lynchings within recent years" (19). As the bonfires rose higher and the mutilation of the lynched corpse entailed ritualistic dismemberment, shock and outrage were harder to come by. Aesthetic disinterest—the sign of mature reflection and appreciation—literally makes for a lethal performance. Excitement created an imagined public that, paradoxically, proved indifferent to lynching. As White charged, "[A]n uncomfortably large percentage of American citizens can read in their newspapers of the slow roasting alive of a human being in Mississippi and turn, promptly and with little thought, to the comic strip or sporting page. Thus has lynching become an almost integral part of our national folkways" (vii). Aesthetic disinterest manages southern horrors so that the local practice of terror seems abstractly American.

This sense of "national folkways" is a false universal that relies on a parochial understanding, which limits aesthetics to the theatricality of ritualized violence. For DuBois, politically useful aesthetics depends not on false universals but on the avowed partiality of propaganda. Rather than neutralize murderous regionalism with an abstract aesthetics that pretended to be beyond location, the *Crisis* set "Music and Art" against reports of lynching under the banner of a section entitled "Along the Color Line." Beauty has a location, and it's not pretty.

Organized Propaganda

The geography of beauty in the *Crisis* invites dissonance, assembling evidence of black achievements in painting and performance while confronting readers with accounts of injustice that kept at the forefront the NAACP's emphasis on political action. Aesthetic theory envisioned by the *Crisis* insisted on something still more: not only may beauty counteract the mounting record of abuse but

also, as a Kantian endeavor twisted by the materiality of racial violence in America, the political dimension of aesthetic judgment would establish African Americans' sense of right as the common sense of the nation.

The development of aesthetic theory at the *Crisis* in reviews, manifestos, and literary contests lacked the rigor of an academic inquiry into beauty. With faculty members such as George Santayana and John Dewey, Harvard College could claim to be a major contributor to American aesthetics for three decades. It is by no means incidental that Santayana served as DuBois's tutor and that Dewey's pragmatism influenced DuBois. Despite these lines of affiliation, it is difficult to say whether the seeds of DuBois's interest in aesthetics were planted in his student days at Harvard, to sprout later in the pages of the *Crisis*, or whether Harvard was catching up with the preeminent African American publication of the day. Certain it is, however, that Dewey invested aesthetics with the transformative capacity to emancipate people from stultifying convention. His *Art as Experience* expresses this sentiment: art exerts a "liberating and uniting power" that is "looked upon with the eye of suspicion by the guardians of custom. . . . Art is a mode of prediction not found in charts and statistics, and it insinuates possibilities of human relations not to be found in rule and precept, admonition and administration" (349). Dewey's meditation goes global at this juncture, as he hypothesizes a "common world" that would be not national but cosmopolitan, a community expanding beyond citizens of the United States to include geographically unspecific "human relations." His impression of aesthetic experience echoes the discourse of Pan-Africanism that had been appearing regularly in the pages of the *Crisis*. Did Harvard educate DuBois, or was the *Crisis* making an impression among leading United States intellectuals? "When we enter into the spirit of Negro or Polynesian art," Dewey writes, we experience a refreshing dislocation that frees us from the bias of a First World perspective. Stilted tastes, stuffy preconceptions, and cloying criteria prized by Western subjects "melt away" in the encounter. Global culture widens access to aesthetic sensibilities, although it remains a question if that experience is available only to First World tourists who consume objets d'art taken from Oceania or Africa. As he rejects rationalism in favor of "melting," Dewey slips into primitivism, accepting the belief that life forces enervated by mechanization and standardization are revitalized by contact with "tribal" influences (334). Such exoticism implies that Dewey's transformative aesthetics may not be all that transformative.

World art had been a touchy matter since the advent of world war. When the director of Princeton's Psychology Laboratory, Herbert Langfeld, went to Cambridge to deliver a series of lectures at Harvard, he began by invoking "the aesthetic attitude" as reason enough to explain the United States' involvement in World War I. Why would a "free nation" allow itself to become entangled in what many viewed as a conflict among European powers battling over the last shreds of feudal privilege? "The sense of beauty," Langfeld declared, drew the United States into the war on behalf of cultural treasures threatened by military aggression (3). Art appreciation justifies military force:

> It required no *organized propaganda* to arouse the indignation of neutrals when ancient churches, libraries, and town halls were leveled by the invaders. The indignation was immediate and almost universal, as is the case in the arousal of a primitive instinct, and it was not because these were useful buildings, or because they were devoted to worship, but evidently and undeniably for the reason that they were works of art. (3–4)

Beauty awakens citizens to injustice, working at an instinctual level to fuse ethical concern and artistic appreciation. "Organized propaganda" is superfluous because the inborn

psychological response to the beautiful justifies United States intervention in making the world safe for democracy. State-sponsored propaganda is unnecessary because aesthetic judgment is already hardwired with the criteria of the state; universal feelings of *sensus communis* have a decidedly American cast.

The campaign against lynching, in contrast, required organized propaganda. Activists at the *Crisis* were not willing to wait for a solution that would bubble forth from aesthetic instincts. Left to its own devices, the "art" of lynching, as White argued, had been hard at work in the South victimizing black populations while entertaining whites. Even so, academic theorists resisted imperatives to organize art as propaganda. Langfeld's *The Aesthetic Attitude* (1920) draws the line at using art to rally supporters around a cause: "Aesthetics can merely indicate that as soon as a work of art communicates nothing but a lesson to the observer, it ceases to be for him a work of art" (104). Lest aesthetics foment agitation in place of harmony, Langfeld locates repose at the heart of beauty. When "one views an object aesthetically," symmetry, proportion, and balance provide an intrinsic code for the self. Aesthetic power overwhelms the individual who encounters these precepts, internalizing them as the beautiful alignment of subjectivity to form. No battle takes place since the individual's participation in bending self to form occurs "without any opposition upon one's part" (59). Langfeld embraces this paradox, stipulating that the self should be active in cultivating aesthetic repose. For the theorist who sees "no organized propaganda" as freedom's negative condition, aesthetic repose delays political engagement.

Aesthetic theory in universities was a bundle of contradictions that, on the one hand, encouraged aesthetic repose as a precondition for deliberate action and, on the other, discouraged politicized uses of art as doctrinaire and less than beautiful. The authority of his alma mater notwithstanding, DuBois was moved to challenge this wisdom and ask, "What has this Beauty to do with the world?" Writing at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, he charged that aesthetic repose not only provided a rationale for white disinterestedness but also encouraged indifference among a younger generation of black artists. He proposed instead an aesthetic strategy that took the idea of beauty's connection to the world as a geopolitical provocation toward global thinking, using aesthetics to open a wedge between nationalism and internationalism.

Aesthetics survived in the *Crisis* largely as a global discourse that lent diasporic energy to its pages. In a series of letters mailed to the *Crisis* from the Soviet Union, Claude McKay credited Marcus Garvey, no doubt to DuBois's chagrin, with recognizing the significance of "organized propaganda" for countering decades of "white American propagandists." In contrast to Langfeld, who saw no need for organized propaganda and assumed that art would do its political work instinctively, McKay takes propagandistic art as direct action to stem a flood of "misinformation" that begins with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Organized propaganda, he argues, can be useful precisely for organizing blacks to advance "racial interests . . . on a world scale, to combat their white exploiters and traducers" (61–62). DuBois had long operated on "a world scale," and his attraction to propaganda rescued him from the instinctual beauty of nationalism backed by Langfeld and other defenders of Western civilization. In a January 1924 article on neocolonialism and Pan-Africanism, DuBois stated, "Nothing is more interesting than to read the carefully prepared propaganda upon which the British Empire thrives" ("Black Man" 105). As he examines alibis for imperialism, DuBois responds with a mixture of icy condescension and fascination, viewing propaganda's sleight of hand as "interesting" because what had come to interest him was the power of representation—and misrepresentation—to

achieve hegemony. At this point, however, his aesthetic theory conceptualizes propaganda not as a tactic of transformation but only as a force aligned with domination. Hence the difficulty of articulating politicized aesthetics. The presence of staffers at the *Crisis* intent on salvaging art from what was perceived as blatant overpoliticization did not make things any easier. Thus, if 1924 began with DuBois's warming up to political aesthetics, the line against propaganda was fixed as ever by February, when the *Crisis* condemned Dixon's *The Leopard Spots* for "viciously" trespassing the "Color Line type of fiction" for "purposes of propaganda" (Braithwaite 205).

Conflict came with the territory: the staff of the NAACP encouraged propaganda, deplored the intrusion of politics into literature, and called for more activist writing, disagreeing with one another each issue. Arnold Rampersad takes stock of this uncertainty, noting that DuBois "had written so ambivalently and confusedly about the relation of art to propaganda that misinterpretation on this subject was inevitable" (*Art* 190–91). Nevertheless, DuBois's appreciation of propaganda steadily grew in proportion to his impatience with nationalist criteria of art. As DuBois makes global connections between imperialist struggles among European powers over Africa and the exploitation of Western working people, he condemns propaganda as a threat to democracy. His condemnation, however, is laced with awe as he recognizes that propaganda is a "tremendous weapon in our day" ("Black Man" 111). This mixed assessment raised the possibility of revaluing propaganda so that prejudice against art with overt agendas might be temporarily set aside and beauty construed as a politically pragmatic form. Not for nothing would he look back on this stage of his career and remember it as a time of training for his "role as a master of propaganda" (*Dusk* 94).

Despite DuBois's reevaluation of political aesthetics, White persisted in viewing propaganda as a shameless tool of the master class. "NEGROES ANXIOUS TO RETURN SOUTH" and "MAGNOLIA STATE INVITES WANDERING NEGROES HOME," ran headlines in southern papers trying to halt the exodus of black labor to northern cities. White cited these journalistic "untruths" as proof of the "mythical and slanderous propaganda" designed to keep blacks literally in their place ("Success" 112, 115). Given his uncompromising view of propaganda, White no doubt bristled at DuBois's review of his first novel, *The Fire in the Flint*. Reportedly written in just twelve days, the novel concerns a Harvard-trained black physician who returns to practice his profession in a Georgia town where working-class whites practice intimidation and lynching with a professionalism all their own. DuBois praised the novel generally but found fault with White for having imbibed the cant of the former planter class to the extent that *The Fire in the Flint* lets southern gentility off the hook by casting white poverty and ignorance as the sources of black victimization. Having no use for class nostalgia, DuBois criticized this aspect of *The Fire in the Flint* as "based on the propaganda which sons and daughters of slave-barons have spread" ("Fall Books").

Viewing propaganda as merely negative, White undercut art's use for democratic struggle. In *The Fire in the Flint* and *Flight*, his novel two years later, he invalidated aesthetics by gendering aesthetic interest as a feminine preoccupation. In a world where black masculinity is under attack, beauty is hardly the weapon of choice, for it represents a debilitating detour from hands-on politics. Art jeopardizes black masculinity by inviting suspicions that the doctor in *The Fire in the Flint*, an avid reader, is not only "decadent" and "effete" but also "a little queer in the head," disposed to "moral turpitude and perversion" (39). The charge of queerness at once hypersexualizes and emasculates black men, raising the troubling implication that art in the context of lynching is somehow

responsible for violence. Like lynching, art incites panic over black male sexual deviance and then punishes black men for that construction. White exposes the addictive unreality of this sexual-gender mythology by speaking of beauty in both novels as an "opiate" (*Fire* 44; *Flight* 94). The best the doctor can do is use literature as a narcotic to stupefy political consciousness when life under Jim Crow becomes unbearable. Mimi, the heroine of *Flight*, turns a more sympathetic ear to art, taking it in as "an opiate to forget hard circumstance." Instead of finding a use *for* art, she simply uses it, becoming strung out on opera taken in from the cheap seats at Carnegie Hall, the sopranos and tenors affecting her "as drugs or liquor to addicts—they swept her up, up above her narrow, difficult existence to a world where cares and sorrows and toils did not exist" (195). *Flight* pushes a "just say no" attitude toward aesthetics, fearful that all beauty leads to illusions of escape and false transcendence. White's novels spoke for many writing about art and literature in the *Crisis*, who, because they did not believe in propaganda, saw little value in aesthetics.

This rejection remains consistent with the deprecatory gendering of aesthetics. Fauset, usually a staunch ally of DuBois, elaborated on the social inefficacy of beauty as feminine weakness in her novella of passing, "The Sleeper Wakes." Appearing serially in the *Crisis*, Fauset's narrative asks just how much social power beauty can exert. Not much is her answer. Only through the deracialization of beauty does her heroine, Amy, achieve social status; by passing as white, she finds a husband who showers her with jewelry. Though cozy with white economic power, Amy recognizes her powerlessness to curb her husband's virulent racism; she ultimately judges her beauty as weak—indeed, as effeminate. She correctly judges her personal attractiveness to be a valuable sexual commodity in the eyes of white men, but she errs in investing it with any political valence. When she tries to cash in on that asset to purchase social justice, she only receives proof of beauty's lack of value. Stepping between her husband and a black servant, who are about to come to blows, she desperately clings to the white man to prevent him from fulfilling his threat to have the black man "hanging so high by midnight" (229). For a decade, the *Crisis* had been counteracting the ugliness of black victimization with occasional remarks on African American artistic accomplishments. Now in Fauset's novella of 1920, beauty goes head to head with lynching—and comes up short in the contest.

Bent on lynching, her husband pries apart her arms, leaving Amy clutching at self-accusation: "How, *how* could she keep him back! She hated her arms with their futile beauty" (229). Stigmatized as feminine, beauty has no role to play in the defense of black masculinity. Overvaluing beauty, specifically her own physical attractiveness, Fauset's heroine blunders in thinking that a white husband would prize physical attractiveness over deeply held racism. Once beauty is asked to justify something other than its own existence, once a race woman tries to put it to use in the belief that art may be for something other than its own sake, it fades. In publishing Fauset's novella, the *Crisis* undid its own attempts to distill a political methodology from aesthetics. This contradiction moved DuBois to action in subsequent issues.

An Alternative Aesthetics

Announcing the criteria for the NAACP's literary prizes of 1926, the *Crisis* offered this advice to aspiring writers:

> We want especially to stress the fact that while we believe in Negro art we do not believe in any art simply for art's sake. We want the earth beautiful but we are primarily interested in the earth. We want Negro writers to produce beautiful things but we stress the things rather than the beauty. . . . Use propaganda if you want. ("Krigwa")

Although these guidelines came with no list of examples, DuBois's *Quest of the Silver Fleece* and *Dark Princess* would have fit the bill. While it is easy to see these novels as overtly, even blatantly, political, a lot of work—perhaps too much—must be done to claim these novels as artistic by conventional academic standards. DuBois had few qualms about downplaying the artistic value of *Quest* and years later favorably evaluated the novel not as a literary artifact but as "an economic study of some merit" (*Dusk* 269). It may be wasted effort to claim these novels as artistic, but locating them as aesthetic interventions is another story.

Aesthetics saturates these inartistic novels. In the first crisis of *Dark Princess*, Matthew feels at a loss when a reference to Benedetto Croce's *Aesthetic* flies over his head. With perfect aplomb he recollects himself and belts out a Negro spiritual to convince a congress of the world's "darker races" that African Americans are ready to take part in worldwide revolution. His aesthetic range—diving into the depths of African American culture to resurface with the "Great Song of Emancipation"—makes an eloquent case for the political capacity of his brethren (25). He demonstrates that capacity himself by running for the United States Congress. Soon disgusted by the ugliness of electoral politics, he turns instead to art, hanging prints by Picasso, Gaugin, and Matisse on his walls. Testing the limits of aesthetic representation, he questions standard forms of political representation that entail graft and compromise. Art provides solace for the "esthetic disquiet" Matthew feels at bartering away principle in the "political game" of electioneering (147). But in no way does art displace politics. Abandoning the usual criteria of "ideal beauty, fitness and curve and line," he develops an interest in the iconoclastic beauty of Picasso—"a wild, unintelligible thing of gray and yellow and black" (193). This avant-garde sensibility refuses the regularities of the color line: his expanded palette highlights the global canvas of Asian and African decolonization movements.

Matthew's work as a ditchdigger actualizes DuBois's advice to aspiring writers that art should be "primarily interested in the earth." Art, like Matthew's days in the trenches, is untranscendent, never escaping the conditions of its production. The politician turned day laborer knows exactly how much he has paid for the Picasso painting, a price he measures in the toll that backbreaking labor takes on his body. Looking at the artwork on his walls, Matthew has a revolutionary insight: "I was a more complete man—a real unit of democracy!" (280). His appreciation of iconoclastic visual forms raises questions about how identity is defined in the first place. No process is more political than this initial delimitation; too often political lines are drawn that bypass the basic "units" of democracy. An alternative aesthetics is not about beauty; that topic is the property of a conventional discourse on Art. Instead, radical aesthetic judgment concerns the forms that politics takes—as personal unit, nation-state, or more cosmopolitan entity. Matthew's focus on his individuality is actually a global recognition that all other people also exist as units of democracy. His avant-garde tastes encourage an identity that expands beyond boundaries of state citizenship. This universal thinking sharpens his interest in the world revolutionary organization that appears from time to time at the novel's outer edges. With this worldwide alliance, DuBois imagines a politics of universal form, dramatizing Wai Chee Dimock's claim that aesthetics severely questions the taxonomy of the nation-state. Critique in *Dark Princess* is formal: by thinking about units, DuBois exposes the United States state as an idiosyncratic form that fails to be common to all.

Discerning an alternative aesthetics is harder in *Quest* because beauty is bought and

sold relentlessly in the novel. Beauty in this case is cotton grown in an Alabama swamp, appropriated by local white gentry, and converted into commodities by venture capitalists. Tracing cotton from its cultivation to its manufacture as textile, *Quest* models an aesthetic judgment that refuses to transcend the circumstances of beauty's production. The cotton that Bles and Zora grow in the swamp is "the beautifullest bit of all" because it recalls the "brown back of the world"—both the earth and African American laborers—from which it sprang (52). Since the discourse on beauty, which brings black students into contact with white schoolmarms, is so full-blown in *Quest*, lynching is never distant. As a topic of conversation that momentarily unites black men and white women, beauty also provokes white paranoia and threats of violence. When Bles regales a white teacher, Mary Taylor, with vivid description of a cotton field in bloom, his words convert the landscape she had seen as "desperate prose" into "poetry" that begins to work on her soul—and her body (29). Bles's talk about the color and form of the Silver Fleece produces aesthetic repose in the rapt listener: "'Ah! that must be beautiful,' sighed Miss Taylor, wistfully, sinking to the ground and clasping her hands about her knees" (31). Mary behaves as academic research on aesthetic science dictates that a subject should, rendering herself passive before Bles's beauty. But in the racialized contexts of Alabama, aesthetic repose is loaded with the myth of the white woman's vulnerability to black male physicality. As Bles becomes aware that two white men are witness to his discourse on beauty, a discourse that Mary sexualizes by going down on her knees before a black man, he recognizes the peril of his situation. Beauty in the cotton field encourages Mary to forget these contextual factors, and she realizes with a start that "the fact of the boy's color had quite escaped her" (32). Bles does not enjoy that luxury. His discourse on beauty never outstrips violence and death in the South; to forget the location of aesthetic experience is to risk one's life.

Notes

1. On the *Crisis* and Washington, see Carroll 90.

2. Exact numbers are hard to come by: "estimates made by the NAACP and by anti-lynching activists . . . suggest that the number of black victims ranged from 3,337 to 10,000" (Gunning 5).

3. The allusion to *nature morte* accompanies Allen's photographic montage (Allen and Littlefield).

4. On the 1919 lynchings in Phillips County, Arkansas, see Dray 238–43.

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