

Black in No Man's Land: Race, Masculinity, and Citizenship in World War I Literature

Scenes of black soldiers on the battlefields of France offer depictions of black men as assertive and heroic, which diverge from expected Jim Crow formations of race and masculinity. Emerging from the disruptions of the First World War, these imaginative depictions of black masculinity belie the reductive stereotypes of African Americans that commonly justified the oppressive practices of lynching and disenfranchisement. Moreover, the juxtaposition of these new images of black heroism with depictions of white soldiers as wounded and in need of assistance offered African American authors a fresh occasion to highlight the injustices of Jim Crow racism and expose the hypocrisy of the United States fighting a war to “make the world safe for democracy.” The contrast between the racist preconceptions of white soldiers and the heroic sacrifices made by black soldiers shines a light on the denial of African American citizenship as an injustice that compromises American ideals of democracy and equality. And the image of black and white soldiers dying arm-in-arm on the battlefield visualizes the bond of military brotherhood evokes and a sense of masculine sameness that was routinely and systematically denied by the racialized emasculation of the lynching era.

These dynamics are particularly evident in a recurring scene of a black American and a white American resolving their racial animosities when they meet as wounded soldiers in no man's land. I argue that this recurring scene of two Americans transcending racial differences through a confrontation with each other constitutes a coherent trope of World War I literature. This trope of two Americans allowed African American authors to reframe the First World War as a space where Jim Crow racism is defeated through interracial cooperation. A study of these interracial battlefield confrontations illuminates how the disruptions of the First World War enabled authors to revise the tropes and conventions of nineteenth century racial melodrama in

ways that shaped the contours of American literature throughout the 1920s. Moreover, these literary revisions engendered new formations of race and masculinity as legible identities, establishing a new black assertiveness that animated what historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has called the long civil rights movement.¹

The identifiable pattern of common narrative features that comprise the trope of two Americans appears most distinctly in Florence Lewis Bentley's short story "Two Americans" (1921). Revolving around the central act of a black soldier choosing to risk his life to save a wounded white soldier, this battlefield encounter includes six key details:

1. a black soldier meets a (more) wounded white soldier in no man's land,
2. the black and white soldiers discover that they knew (of) each other in America before the war,
3. the black soldier shares his water, as a gesture of nurture and support,
4. the black soldier actively decides to risk his life or safety to save the white soldier, *despite* a direct history of discrimination,
5. both soldiers die as "brothers," and
6. the death scene is presented in a vivid description evoking a *tableau vivant*.

Accounting for variations of setting, characterization, and action, these recurring features represent the most common details of the trope of two Americans, although some aspects are implied more than explicitly depicted in some versions of the trope. By arranging the core features of the trope of two Americans, African American authors could deploy this battlefield encounter to contrast the heroic sacrifice of black soldiers with the hypocrisy of America's wartime promise to "make the world safe for democracy." America's continuing policies of racial inequality—even within the army itself—are especially contrasted against the ideal of military

brotherhood that is brought about by the selfless sacrifice of the black soldier figure. Even though the presence of a white soldier and a black soldier is the most essential feature of this scenario as a recognizable trope, I refer to this recurring scene as the trope of two Americans to point to Bentley's story as the prime example and to reflect the transformation of racial identity and the insistence on equality that is central to the trope itself.

The recurring depictions of black men standing up to racism while facing down the dangers of war reflect the broader attempts by black authors and race leaders to embrace the First World War as an opportunity to advocate for African American citizenship to insist that black Americans were entitled to the right to vote and legal protection from the threat of mob violence. As a symbol of civic manhood and military citizenship, the figure of the black soldier provides a compressed and potent image that allowed African American authors to engage the discourse of these rights of citizenship. In addition to Bentley, a number of other black authors depict scenes in which black soldiers confront the racism of white America on the battlefield. Versions of the trope of two Americans appear in two one-act plays—"On the Fields of France" (1920) by Joseph Cotter Jr. and "Everyman's Land" (1930) by Randolph Edmonds—and in two full-length novels—Jessie Fauset's *There is Confusion* (1924) and Victor Daly's *Not Only War: A Story of Two Great Conflicts* (1932). In the short works by Bentley, Cotter, and Edmonds, the black and white Americans who meet on the battlefield remain unnamed, giving them an everyman quality and making the racial tensions more universally relatable to Americans' personal experiences. In the two novels, Fauset and Daly expand on the pre-war relationship between the black and white Americans who will meet on the battlefield to add depth and specificity to their critique of Jim Crow racism. In all five versions of the trope of two Americans, the confrontation between black and white Americans facing each other as soldiers in the liminal spaces of war presents a figure

of equality and masculine sameness that challenges the enforced hierarchical nature of racial relations within Jim Crow culture.

Revolving around the crucial confrontation between the black and white soldiers on the battlefield, the trope of two Americans constitutes the type of scene of facing that was first theorized by Kimberly Benston in his 1990 article “Facing Tradition: Revisionary Scenes in African American Literature.” According to Benston, the textual figure of “the *face* catching its reflection in some version of the other (be it racial, familial, or even psychical)” allows the subjects of African American literature to “create culture by engaging ideology in awareness of the positions from which they speak even if they cannot form themselves in freedom from ideology” (99, 107). The face-to-face confrontation between the black and white soldiers on the battlefield represents the opportunity for African American authors to embrace the heroic militancy of black soldiers as a cultural signifier of black assertiveness even as they struggle against the continued injustice of Jim Crow racism. In recurring battlefield scenes, a black soldier’s self-aware decision to sacrifice his safety for the higher ideals of democracy brings him face to face with a white soldier who is shocked to recognize the injustice of his own earlier prejudices. Thus, the trope of two Americans revises “the master-facing-slave motif, turning the astonishment of slavery’s outrage into a smiling shock of recognition” (Benston 104-5). And in offering a moment of interracial identification, the facing encounter between the two soldiers demonstrates Benston’s assertion that such revisionary facing scenes offer “the possibility of reversal, of mutuality through an unrehearsed exchange of visions... without motive or reflection... unburdened by the narratives of containment and resistance, that, from afar might seem to render them differently vulnerable” (104). Significantly, the confrontation and “exchange of visions” between the black and white soldiers is conditioned by the context of war

and the setting in no man's land, a location that frees the black and white soldiers from Jim Crow "narratives of containment and resistance" and allows them to embody, albeit briefly, a state of equality.

The influence of the no man's land setting on the reversals that occur in these battlefield encounters is further illuminated by Victor Turner's concept of liminality. Positioned physically in the space between enemies, no man's land is literally a liminal space, but as a space that soldiers inhabit temporarily as part of the disruptions of war that take them away from the normal courses of their lives, no man's land also reflects Turner's idea of liminality as a temporal stage of ritual inversion. In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Turner presents liminal phenomena as "a 'moment in and out of time,' and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented" (96). Set in no man's land, away from the "secular social structure" of Jim Crow America, the trope of two Americans signifies the possibility of a recognized social bond that transcends race. And Turner's assertion that such a social bond "has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented" illuminates how this trope works as a figure that both critiques the history of American racial injustice and presents a successful black demand for future recognition. Turner further contends that liminality offers a state of "relatively undifferentiated *communitas*, community, or even communion of equal individuals" as opposed to the more common relationships of a "structured, differentiated, and often hierarchal system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of 'more' or 'less.'" (96). Turner's account of a "hierarchal system" that separates "men in terms of 'more' or 'less'" is an appropriate description of Jim Crow culture and especially of the way that white supremacy

was enforced through a system of racialized masculinities that reserved political, economic, and social power for white men. But in the liminal space of no man's land, the black and white soldiers are able to exist in a "communion of equal individuals," where their actions as soldiers render them equally masculine and equally American.

The depiction of the two soldiers as equally masculine offers a representation that refutes the Jim Crow insistence that black men were always already inferior to white men. In *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (1995), Robyn Wiegman attends to the bifurcation of racialized masculinities by arguing that the black man's "threat to white masculine power arises from the frightening possibility of a masculine sameness not simply from a fear of racial difference" (13). According to Wiegman, the emergence of "lynching and castration as a disciplinary practice linked historically to the political and economic reorganizations that accompanied Reconstruction" was a cultural response to the threat of masculine sameness. The masculine privileges previously reserved for white men, in large part, by the legal institution of slavery were suddenly shared with black men after the abolition of slavery and the ratification of the Reconstruction amendments. And so, the practice of lynching, which had existed as a generalized form of extra-legal punishment, evolved into a racialized phenomenon that deployed a sexualized narrative of a bestial black rapist and incorporated castration into a newly ritualized performance to create a hierarchy of masculinities along racial lines. This enforced hierarchy of masculinities denied the possibility of masculine sameness and recreated a subordinate black masculinity that had been previously assumed under the system of slavery. By the start of the twentieth century, the symbolic potential, and thus the threat, of masculine sameness had been thoroughly suppressed by institutional practices (such as those given legal authority in *Plessy v. Ferguson*), political intimidation (as seen during the Wilmington Race Riots of 1898), and rigid

social expectations for racial behavior (enforced through depictions of racist caricature such as in *The Birth of a Nation* as much as through intermittent lynching). But the trope of two Americans, by depicting a state of masculine sameness through the imagery of military brotherhood, offered an alternative to those social scripts of black masculine identity that evolved in the wake of the Civil War and solidified as the system of Jim Crow.

Bentley's short story "Two Americans" represents this shift from Jim Crow racial hierarchies to a more equal relationship between black and white Americans in the spaces of the First World War. "Two Americans" was published in two halves in *The Crisis* in September and October of 1921. Although the story is framed by scenes of war, much of the first half depicts flashbacks to racial tensions in Jim Crow America and concludes with the lynching of the black soldier's brother. In the second half of the story, the black soldier meets his brother's killer on the battlefield. His decision to risk his own life to save the white soldier embodies the patriotic heroism of black soldiers and leads to the reconciliation of the two men as a sign of mutual recognition across racial lines. By tracing the repeated imagery of facing and vision in Bentley's "Two Americans," I argue that the battlefield confrontation between the black and white soldiers represents a new kind of scene of facing, in which the First World War setting allows identities that were denied under the ideology of Jim Crow.

Just a month after the end of the First World War, Florence Lewis Bentley published "A Negro Woman to Her Adopted Soldier Boy," an open letter suggesting that black soldiers were heroes for facing the oppression of Jim Crow America as much as for their sacrifices in the war itself. Appearing in the December 1918 issue of *The Crisis*, Bentley's letter begins by responding to a postcard from a soldier and relating a conversation with friends in which she defended her

affection for a soldier she had never met. Although the soldier is quite possibly fictional, these opening moves situate a conversation about black soldiers in the ongoing public discourse of wartime patriotism. Bentley then responds to a letter sent from the soldier, which apparently related that before he could leave for the war in Europe, the soldier had heard of that “terrible lynching” and “that humiliating order to the soldiers, in a western camp, to submit tamely to personal insult, from which the uniform of their country was powerless to protect them.” Here, Bentley references the Houston Riot of 1917 and the nineteen black soldiers who were court-martialed and executed without appeal as an example of Jim Crow regulations that punished black men for standing up to defend their rights (66). In response to these outrages, Bentley declares “that the Negro soldier of America is the most heroic figure in this whole war” (66-7). For Bentley, the heroism of black soldiers comes from their willingness “to protect from disaster the Idea for which this country stands” in the face of persistent lynching and racial discrimination even within the army itself (66). Declaring that her adopted black soldier would “be half a man if [he] did not feel the infamy of it all,” Bentley implies that black soldiers are just as masculine as white men and indicts those racist forces of Jim Crow that systematically emasculate black men—and oppress the African American community more generally. Published three years later, “Two Americans” develops many of the themes of Bentley’s 1918 letter into narrative form and embeds the conflict between Jim Crow racism and the heroic masculinity of black soldiers into a no man’s land encounter between black and white soldiers.

The opening of “Two Americans” creates a sense of curiosity about the role of black soldiers, much like Bentley’s use of the postcard and the reported conversation at the beginning of her 1918 letter. “Two Americans” opens with a French civilian perspective of the rebuilt town of St. Gervais, France two years after it became “one of the first spots in France to feel the

devastating fury of the Hun” (202). With the approach of the “well-known sound, the tramp, tramp, tramp of marching feet,” the villagers do not know “who that marching host might be, friend or foe” (202). Although presented here from a French point of view, this uncertainty about who is “friend or foe” also reflects black Americans’ feelings about traveling to France to “make the world safe for Democracy” when they faced such oppression at home. The tension between the black and white soldiers in “Two Americans” revolves around an American racial version of this uncertain “friend or foe” dynamic. By opening with a French perspective, however, Bentley uses the uncertainty to introduce an alternative view of American identity that is not bound by the rigid racial divisions of Jim Crow thinking. The marching feet are revealed to be a troop of American soldiers; the villagers excitedly cheer “vivent les Americains.” And when a “curious change in the soldiers” near the end of the column presents the villagers with “black faces and brown,” they hesitate only momentarily before shouting, “ceux-ci sont aussi des Americains” (“these are Americans, too”) (203).ⁱⁱ For the French civilians, race has no bearing on Americanness. The black soldiers are equally American and equally celebrated. Presented here in the story’s opening, the sense of an American nationality that transcends racial divisions is a notion that the narrative structure of “Two Americans” first juxtaposes against the racial practices of Jim Crow and then reaffirms in the closing imagery of the two soldiers’ shared grave.

Moving from the opening French perspective of a multiracial Americanness, Bentley’s story next introduces the image of a black and a white American working together as a sign of interracial cooperation. The Americans march on, and before long, the villagers hear the familiar sounds of battle. The next evening, a French woman and her daughter are startled by a knock at the door. They eventually open the door: “across the threshold tumbled two men—a black man and a white man—both clad in the uniform of America. The white man was on the shoulder of

the black man, who evidently had been carrying him. Both seemed badly wounded and were covered with blood and mud, and to the frightened gaze of the French woman both seemed dead” (203). This early scene, presented from the French civilian’s perspective, presents the reader with an image of a wounded black soldier risking his own life to save that of a white soldier. When the black soldier and the white soldier—who remain unnamed throughout the story—are taken to a field hospital, a nurse notes that “their wrist tags showed they were both from Huxton, Georgia.” She surmises that they “knew each other at home, very likely” and comments on the “splendid courage in that black fellow” (203-4). By presenting this post-battlefield image first but withholding the American context that led these two men to war and the battlefield context that led to the black soldier’s sacrifice, Bentley begins with an image of interracial cooperation as an alternative to American racial animosities.

The opening French perspective of American soldiers and the post-battlefield image of interracial cooperation create a frame for the black soldier’s explanation of how he came to save the white soldier, an explanation that includes both their personal history in America and their encounter on the battlefield. Building from an opening that presents black soldiers as “aussi des Americains” and also the *in medias res* scene of interracial cooperation, Bentley creates a tension that is continually deferred throughout the story. The black soldier’s first whispered words—“did I save him?”—prompt the attending doctor to assume that he “must care for him a great deal,” but the black soldier’s matter-of-fact reply that “[he] hated him” leaves the doctor (and the reader) “really mystified” (204). The black soldier is initially reluctant to say more, and when he does begin talking, he tells a story not about the white soldier but of his own brother’s challenge to Jim Crow emasculation and oppression. Published in the September issue of *The Crisis*, the first half of the story ends abruptly in the middle of the lynching of the black soldier’s brother.

The origins of the white soldier, also from Huxton, Georgia, have not yet been presented to the reader.

In the October issue, the narrative of “Two Americans” picks up exactly where it left off; the black soldier reveals that the white soldier was the ringleader of the lynch mob. After this revelation, the black soldier proceeds to narrate his experience of meeting his brother’s killer in no man’s land and his eventual decision to save him. By publishing the story in two halves, Bentley creates a double climax, juxtaposing the lynching of African Americans in Jim Crow America with the sacrifices of black soldiers in the First World War. Thus, the framing of the story with the French perspective, the two-part narrative, and the black soldier’s intradiegetic narration place the “American atrocities [of Jim Crow racism] in their true relation to the Great World Upheaval,” just as Bentley had done in her 1918 letter through her references to lynching and the Houston Riot of 1917 (Bentley 1918, 66). This juxtaposition between the injustices of American race relations and black service in the First World War is one of the core themes that repeats throughout the various versions of the trope of two Americans.

Joe—the black soldier’s brother and the only named character in Bentley’s story—provides the crucial link between the two climaxes and clarifies the relationship between the “American atrocities” and the “Great World Upheaval.” When the story shifts to the black soldier’s intradiegetic narration after the suspenseful opening, he tells first of the privations of the southern sharecropping system and the constant bullying that he and his brother had to endure. After a particularly bad incident in which Joe was chased and stoned by a gang of white boys, he declares, “That’s the las’ time I’ll run. I’m goin’ to act like a man. If I’m chased again before we leave this God-forsaken place, I’m goin’ to show fight” (204). Joe’s message that “to act like a man” is “to show fight” is particularly interesting because Bentley’s narrative structure

filters and frames this assertion through the injured black soldier in France. In the context of Jim Crow, the black soldier and his brother knew that when they were confronted by the “gang of white boys” that terrorized them, they “always had to run, of course, ‘cause [they] knew [they] would be killed if [they] hit back” (204). After Joe declares that he is going to “show fight” he buys a gun to defend himself. Whereas Joe is predictably lynched when he shoots a white man in self-defense, the black soldier is commended for his “splendid courage” within the context of the First World War.

Using the suspended description of the lynching at the end of the first half of the story, Bentley presents the reader with an image of Joe that is as easily associated with the front lines of war as with the home front in America: “one eye was out, the blood was trickling all around his face from a cut in the head, and one arm hung like it was broken” (205). When the narrative of “Two Americans” resumes in the October issue, it picks up exactly where it left off, introducing the white soldier as “the ring leader ... who applied the torch to [the black soldier’s] brother’s helpless body” (250). The description of Joe during the lynching as being “stretched out... like a cross and nailed down [by] his hands and feet” to a table evokes an obvious Christ motif, a common rhetorical strategy of black authors seeking to make sense of the racial persecution in America.ⁱⁱⁱ Bentley’s use of the Christ imagery also foreshadows the story’s moral about universal brotherhood in the second climax. Moreover, by embedding the imagery of crucifixion in the black soldier’s description of his brother’s lynching, Bentley creates a corollary to the claim in her 1918 letter that the heroism of black soldiers was evident in their willingness to sacrifice themselves “in the defense of a country which crucifies [their] brothers” (Bentley 1918, 66).

Although several aspects of “Two Americans”—a strategically suspenseful opening, the juxtaposition of “American atrocities” with the “Great World Upheaval,” and lynching as a major impediment to universal brotherhood—repeat claims from Bentley’s letter in the December 1918 issue of *The Crisis*, the one key difference between the letter and the story highlights the trope of two Americans as a figure that represents the space of war as place of transformation. In her letter, Bentley praises her “adopted soldier boy” for volunteering, but the black soldier in “Two Americans” is a draftee. By presenting the black soldier as a draftee who is initially reluctant to fight and whose ultimate transformation does not occur until he is on the battlefield itself, Bentley foregrounds the transformative potential of wartime disruptions, emphasizing the heroic sacrifice of the black soldier over his aggressive militancy. Before he was drafted, the black soldier’s driving motivation was to find the ringleader of the mob that killed his brother and “make him suffer just what Joe suffered” (250). His initial thoughts upon being drafted are only of escaping the racial injustice of America: “[He is] glad to get away from America” (250). But he comes to realize that the war offers the opportunity to counter the racist ideology of Jim Crow America: “[he makes] up [his] mind that [he] would be such a good soldier that those white men back home would understand just what kind of real men we Negroes are” (250). His assertion that the service of black soldiers could convince white Americans that African Americans were indeed “real men” echoes Joe’s claim that “to act like a man” is “to show fight.”^{iv} The conflation of manhood and fighting highlights how military service enabled black men to think of their masculinity in new ways.

The tension between the black soldier’s competing motivations comes to a head when he encounters a wounded white soldier in no man’s land. When he discovers that the white soldier is the leader of the mob that lynched his brother, he is, at first, dumbfounded at being presented

with the opportunity to exact his revenge. When the white soldier asks for “some water, for pity’s sake,” he retorts, “did you pity Joe when you burned him in Huxton? I’m Joe’s brother!” (251). Dragging the injured white soldier into the scorching sun, the black soldier tells his brother’s killer: “Now you are going to suffer some what you made Joe suffer... Now you’ll burn and burn, and no water for you. And when you get to hell, remember Joe’s brother sent you there” (251). The black soldier’s understandable desire to let the white soldier die for his past crimes reflects the black soldier’s initial half-hearted commitment to the war effort as a draftee who mainly wanted to escape the discrimination of Jim Crow. But moving from this perspective to the black soldier’s ultimate decision to save the white soldier, the narrative structure of “Two Americans” builds toward a moment that presents the experience of the First World War as an impetus for the transformation of American racial roles and expectations.

The confrontation with Jim Crow racism and the subsequent reversal of expected racial reactions are concentrated in the battlefield facing encounter between the black and the white soldiers. The black soldier’s narration of the key encounter in no man’s land is full of facial imagery and visual confrontation:

I looked over and saw him there, face downward. I turned him over to the light and I saw his face—the face of the man who had burned my brother! I remember I burst out laughing. I just laughed and laughed! I just couldn’t stop...

He must have heard me, for he stirred and opened his eyes and stared at me...

He stared at me a minute, and then just begun to whimper like a little baby. ‘Now you are going to suffer some what you made Joe suffer,’ sez I. (250-251)

The first of these looks recalls Joe’s lynching—a synecdoche for the oppression of Jim Crow in general—and prompts a near-hysterical emotional response as the black soldier is confronted

with the agent of his brother's death. The second look moves toward one of recognition and affirmation; the white soldier may not immediately recognize the black soldier as Joe's brother, but he has heard him and stirs in response. In the final look, the white soldier whimpers in defeat recognizing a just anger and the power to help him being withheld. Taken together, these looks present a tense exchange of power and recognition. First, the black soldier recognizes the white, and then, the white soldier recognizes the black. And yet, this moment remains fraught with the history of Jim Crow racism. The soldiers are not yet "two Americans"; they are divided by a racial hierarchy that permits white violence against black Americans with impunity. Although the history of that racial hierarchy has been brought with them onto the battlefield, the destabilizations of the war are evident in the fact that, in this moment, it is the black soldier who acts violently against the white by leaving him to die on the battlefield, and he does so without the fear of retribution.

In addition to highlighting the violence of Jim Crow racism, the facing imagery in "Two Americans" also foregrounds the disruptions of the First World War as an occasion to revise expected racial hierarchies. Having left the white soldier to die, the black soldier "laughed all the way up the road" until he is confronted with a vision of Joe. Assuring the doctor, who is listening to his tale, that he was "not out of [his] head," the black soldier insists that "[*he*] was facing Joe" and describes him standing: "as [he] last saw him. The blood all streaming down all around his head, like it crowned him, and his hands and feet showed where they had nailed him that day" (251; emphasis in original). Recalling the imagery of Joe's lynching, Bentley depicts him as an obvious Christ figure. But more than the usual critique of the persecution of African Americans in Jim Crow America, Bentley uses Joe as Christ figure to offer a moral of universal brotherhood. Joe tells the black soldier to "go back and save your brother." When the black

soldier responds “he is not my brother... you are my brother,” Joe insists “all men are your brothers... go back, go back” (251). After being rebuked by the apparition of his dead brother, the black soldier returns to the white soldier and, using the last of his water, “moisten[s] his lips and bathe[s] his face before [he takes] him on [his] back and start[s] once more on the road” (252). The black soldier’s sharing his water and bathing the white soldier’s face represents an intimate gesture that embraces the Christian ideal of the brotherhood of man, transcending the racial divisions of Jim Crow America.

The idea of a universal brotherhood is highlighted by Bentley’s biblical allusion to the parable of the sheep and the goats. The black soldier’s initial certainty that the white soldier was going to hell, Joe’s message that “all men are... brothers,” and the act of sharing of water all resonate specifically with the parable of the sheep and the goats that Jesus tells in Matthew 25:31-40. Stating “I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink,” Jesus enumerates the basic acts of kindness associated with Christian compassion and then asserts that the righteous—those that will go to heaven—have performed those acts of kindness for strangers as well as for Christ: “inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” By alluding to this specific biblical passage and showing the black soldier’s change of heart, Bentley suggests that action, rather than race, separates men. Although this seems like a small detail, the imagery the black soldier sharing his water with the white soldier as a deliberate choice and a gesture of brotherhood repeated in almost all versions of the trope of two Americans.

What is most interesting about Bentley’s use of Joe as Christ figure is that the way in which the moral of universal brotherhood is framed specifically by the experience of the war and soldiering. The manner in the black soldier recounts Joe’s message makes this point clear:

He made me know that this war—this war which I was fightin' in—has come to wipe away hate. That any one act of hate—like what I was doin'—only made the war longer. That all men are brothers, black and white, yellow and brown. That when hate was cleaned away, everybody would know this and act like brothers. That if I killed in hatred, I wasn't a true soldier, but a deserter—giving aid to the enemy and making things harder for all my comrades. And he said that if I did what I was doing, I was killing him again, just as the white mob did. (251-252)

Joe makes it clear that the brotherhood of “all men” is directly related to the war that “has come to wipe away hate.” Echoing Jesus’s rhetoric—“ye have done it unto me”—Joe tells the black soldier that allowing the white soldier to die is like “killing him [Joe] again.” This concluding assertion is founded on the idea that allowing the white soldier to die would make the black soldier not “a true soldier, but a deserter—giving aid to the enemy and making things harder for all [his] comrades.” When the black soldier turns around to go back and help the white soldier, he has put aside his initial personal desire to find the leader of his brother’s lynch mob and “make him suffer.” Instead, he is committed to being a “true soldier,” to “be[ing] such a good soldier that those white men back home would understand just what kind of real men [black soldiers] are” (250). Without invalidating the anger black soldier feels when he confronts his brother’s killer as the embodiment of Jim Crow racism, this second half of the scene of facing prompts the black soldier to revise his understanding of how he relates to the white soldier. In providing the moment of conflict before the black soldier’s transformation, Bentley highlights that the decision to help is not a forgone conclusion. It is the act of making that decision, despite the injustices of Jim Crow, that demonstrates the valor of black soldiers. And so, in this sequence, the multiple representations of “the *face* catching its reflection in some version of the

other (be it racial, familial, or even psychical)” illustrate how the disruptions of the First World War offered the space to present heroic black militancy as a legible cultural identity despite the continuing reductive racism of Jim Crow ideology (Benston 99).

The battlefield encounter also creates space for the white soldier to undergo a similar conversion when he confronts the consequences of his own race hatred. The black soldier decides to carry the white soldier to safety, but when they stop to rest for the night, the facing imagery highlights how the white soldier confronts his own prejudiced views of race. As the black soldier is laying the white one down on a bed of hay to rest for the night, he “see[s] that his eyes were open. When the moon [comes] up [he] could see [the white soldier] still there, watching [him] all the time” (252). Although the white soldier earlier whimpered when he recognized the black soldier as a victim of his own race hatred, here the black soldier’s act of kindness and sacrifice has captured the white soldier’s attention. Hinting at the disruption of wartime spaces, the white soldier says that he “was in another place” and asks why the black soldier “came back for [him]” (252). The black soldier tells him he came back “because [he is] a true soldier and want[s] this war to end!” (252). The war that the black soldier—a “true soldier” in the war to “wipe away hate”—wants to end is the conflict between white and black as much as the Great War in which the two soldiers are fighting. The white soldier is confused by the connection between true soldiers and the war, so the black soldier elaborates upon Joe’s lesson of universal brotherhood. The white soldier comments, “that sounds very queer, but many things over here seem queer and strange and different” (252). Contrary to wartime references to France as “Over There,” the white soldier’s description of the battlefields of France as “over here” conflates the upheaval of no man’s land with the American home front. The white soldier’s

attention to the “queer and strange and different” things in the space of the war calls attention to the disruption of American racial norms.

Moreover, the white soldier suggests that those disruptions might offer a lesson for Americans on the home front: “if those folks back home could see this Hell that hate has made over here—maybe they would get a light on some things” (252). Like the light of the moon that allows the black and the white soldiers to see each other in this moment of quiet repose, the tragedy of the war offers the opportunity to illuminate the common brotherhood of man. This exchange epitomizes the revisionary potential of the scene of facing. The strict hierarchies of Jim Crow have been reversed to allow for a moment of mutual recognition. In the liminal space of no man’s land, the soldiers are not burdened by Jim Crow narratives that dictate narrow and prescriptive role for racial masculinities. Instead of relations of dominance and subordination, the violence of war has rendered them equally vulnerable. And in this moment of homogeneity, these two Americans not separated by racial difference experience “an unrehearsed exchange of visions” (Benston 104). They see each other. But more importantly, they are able to see each other’s view of the world. For the black soldier, this means believing in the ideals and promises of American democracy, in believing that it is worth sacrificing self for a higher purpose, even though all previous experiences might suggest otherwise. For the white soldier, this means recognizing the injustice of American racial hierarchies despite the personal benefits and disincentives from recognizing that unearned privilege. Although the white soldier ultimately dies before he might take his new-found awareness back to America, by including the statement, Bentley makes an implicit appeal to readers to consider “the Hell that hate has made” as an impetus for revising the inequities of Jim Crow.

It is the experience of transformation by both the black soldier and the white soldier that creates the sense of mutual recognition and racial transcendence at the core of the trope of two Americans. As the black soldier concludes his story about his brother's lynching and his decision to save his brother's killer on the battlefield, the scene returns to the frame of the field hospital in the French village. The black soldier would have survived his initial injuries except for the fact that they were "greatly aggravated and complicated by the superhuman exertion he had put forth in carrying his comrade from the battlefield, two miles away" (204). Thus, the black soldier's decision to help the white soldier goes beyond sharing his water as a gesture of brotherhood and includes the sacrifice of his own life so that the white soldier might possibly live. But in the end, both soldiers die from their wounds. They are "given a soldier's burial on the same day... [in] the same wide grave" (252). The "one American flag [that] marks their place of rest" signifies the ideal of a military brotherhood, and "the little French children [who] love to play softly around the grave of 'Two Americans'" represent a view of American identity that makes no racial distinctions, echoing of story's opening perspective of black soldiers as "aussi des Americains" (252). The description of the flag, the children playing, and the flowers "planted there by the warm-hearted French people" offers a picturesque image of national unity and racial harmony (252).

I refer to the recurring scene of black and white Americans meeting in no man's land and dying as soldiers as the trope of two Americans because Bentley's story presents all the key features within a compact narrative form. In "Two Americans," the unnamed black soldier meets a more wounded white soldier in no man's land, a physical space of conflict and liminality that reflects the disruptions of the First World War itself. The protagonist-narrator reveals that he had known the white soldier previously in America. Although the black soldier initially leaves the

white soldier to die as retribution for lynching his brother back in Georgia, he has a vision which leads him to understand the common humanity of man as an ideal that transcends the history of American racial discrimination. Inspired to be a “true soldier” and to show “those white men back home” that African Americans are also “real men,” he returns to the white soldier, first offering the last of his water as a gesture of nurture and support and then risking his life, exacerbating his own injuries as he carries the white soldier to safety upon his back. In the end, both the black and white soldiers come to recognize the greater bond of human brotherhood, a bond exemplified in the vivid description of their common grave. Through its narrative structure and closing imagery, “Two Americans” exemplifies the racial transformation and appeal for mutual recognition that black authors evoke through this particular narrative episode.

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ⁱ For more on the long civil rights movement, see Hall “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past.”

ⁱⁱ Bentley explicitly provides a translation to this phrase, whereas she does not for the early French quote.

ⁱⁱⁱ The image of Joe as Christ recalls the imagery of Du Bois’s short story “Jesus Christ in Texas.” For more on the African American use of Christ imagery to critique lynching, see Cone’s *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

^{iv} For a discussion of the power of the Army confer or deny masculinity, see Gandall, *The Gun and the Pen*.