



Exposing the violence on African American people by white supremacist ideology: Poetry of Sterling Brown and Esther Popel

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Abstract— *The history of African American Poetry is inextricably linked with the capitalist demand for workers from the already established slave market in Africa through the notorious trans-Atlantic slave trade. For example, one of the first poets of African American literature is named Phillis Wheatley but this was not her actual name. Phillis was the name of the slave ship on which she was brought to a foreign land and Wheatley was the name of her white masters who took her as property. The modus operandi of white supremacy was inhuman and extremely violent. Terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan terrorized African Americans. One of the cruel methods of alienating African Americans was the practice of lynching. By this way the black body was converted into an object, which the white 'master' could discipline and punish. In this paper, I have discussed the African American resistance to the practice of lynching using poetry. The poets whose works have been discussed are Sterling Brown and Esther Popel.*



Keywords— *White Supremacy, African American resistance, slavery, violence, capitalism.*

Capitalism in the United States of America, cannot be separated from racism. Both are an integral part of the state structure. Capital was accumulated through the expropriation of land and the capture of slaves along with the genocide of the native population in America. The concept of racism did not exist in ancient or medieval times and is entrenched within capitalism which is continuously devised as a tool to divide the working class. It arose out of the socio-economic needs of the class of people who wanted a narrative for colonizing. Theodore Allen, a historian had surveyed 885 county records and found that there did not exist anything as the superiority of the white race. After the Bacon's rebellion (1676-77) in Virginia when both black and white bonded laborers united with each other and rebelled against their masters, the Virginia slave code was passed in 1705 which created the first form of racial segregation whereby one's color would play an important role in segregating the working class. The unity of the working class as seen in Bacon's rebellion served as a threat to the ruling class of people. Isabel Wilkerson in her book *Caste: The Lies that Divide Us* notes that:

Lynchings were part carnival, part torture chamber, and attracted thousands of onlookers who collectively became accomplices to public sadism. Photographers were tipped off in advance and installed portable printing presses at the lynching sites to sell to lynchers and onlookers like photographers at a prom. They made postcards out of the gelatin prints for people to send to their loved ones. People mailed postcards of the severed, half-burned head of Will James atop a pole in Cairo, Illinois, in 1907. They sent postcards of burned torsos that looked like the petrified victims of Vesuvius, only these horrors had come at the hands of human beings in modern times. Some people framed the lynching photographs with locks of the victim's hair under glass if they had been able to secure any. One spectator wrote on the back of his postcard from Waco, Texas, in 1916: "This is the Barbecue we had last night my picture is to the left with the cross over it your son Joe." This was singularly American. "Even the

Nazis did not stoop to selling souvenirs of Auschwitz,” wrote Time magazine many years later. Lynching postcards were so common a form of communication in turn-of-the-twentieth-century America that lynching scenes “became a burgeoning subdepartment of the postcard industry. By 1908, the trade had grown so large, and the practice of sending postcards featuring victims of mob murderers had become so repugnant, that the U.S. postmaster general banned the cards from the mails. (Wilkerson 94)

According to the Ferris State University:

Within several decades of being brought to the American colonies, Africans were stripped of human rights and enslaved as chattel, an enslavement that lasted more than two centuries. Slavers whipped slaves who displeased them. Clergy preached that slavery was the will of God. Scientists “proved” that blacks were less evolved—a subspecies of humans. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 solidified the importance of slavery to the South's economy. By the mid-19th century, America's westward expansion, along with a growing anti-slavery movement in the North, provoked a national debate over slavery that helped precipitate the American Civil War (1861-65). Though the Union victory freed the nation's four million slaves, the legacy of slavery influenced American history, from the chaotic years of Reconstruction (1865-77) to the civil rights movement that emerged in the 1950s.¹

Amiri Baraka, the founder of the Black Arts Movement, had as his teacher in Howard University Prof. Sterling Allen Brown who had taught Baraka that music could be studied and which implied that black people had their history in their music. Baraka in his autobiography says that Brown was raising the music as an art, a thing for scholarship and research as well as deep enjoyment. Sterling Brown was himself very much influenced by poets like Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg and preferred the vernacular dialect. In 1932 and 1935, he came up with two poems that talk about lynching. Both the poems were published in *Opportunity*. Anne Price in the book *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond* writes:

On December 4, 1931, a mob of two thousand in Salisbury, Maryland, took Mack Williams, an African American man charged with murdering his employer, from his hospital cot, hanged him in front of the court house and cremated his

body. Brown's ballad “He was a Man” enshrines Williams as a folk hero for his unassuming dignity and courage. (Rice 264)

The picture of two thousand white people against one black man shows the terror and the imagination of the fear of the black man. Brown starts the poem “He Was a Man” by saying that the black man had not committed any rape and neither was he drunk. He was not pugnacious in nature and did not interfere much in other people's lives. But in an act of self-defence, he killed a white man. He was a simple man who loved spending time with his family and friends on Eastern Shore which was his place of residence.

It wasn't about no woman,

It wasn't about no rape

He wasn't crazy, and he wasn't drunk.

An' it wasn't no shooting scrape,

He was a man and they laid him down.

He wasn't no quarrelsome feller,

And he let other folks alone,

But he took a life, as a man will do.

In a fight to save his own.

He was a man and they laid him down.

He worked on his little homeplace

Down on the Eastern Shore;

He had his family and he had his friends,

And he didn't expect much more,

He was a man, and they laid him down.

He wasn't nobody's great man,

He wasn't nobody's good,

Was a po' boy tried to get from life

What happiness he could

He was a man and they laid him down. (Ibid)

Next, Brown tells us the name of the white man named Tom Wickley, who was not abused by the man who was later laid down and neither did he do anything when he was being cursed by Wickley. When the white man pulled out his gun to shoot the black man, in self-defence he managed to protect himself. He was injured in the process and he was taken to a hospital. The lynch mob, as soon as they received

¹Quoted from:

<https://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/timeline/slavery.htm>.

the message of the death of a white man in the hands of a black person and rushed in to the hospital from where they took him under broad daylight. The poet emphasises on this point that the black person named Will was not abducted during midnight, very stealthily, but was abducted from the hospital ward in front of everyone's eyes, proving how Jim Crow lynchings were acknowledged in American society. The mob did not hide wearing masks of the Ku Klux Klan and neither did they take Will to a secluded place like a swamp but hung him in front of the courthouse and after that burnt his body to ash. Sterling Brown compares this whole event to a barbeque to compare the mood of the event. Lynching of black people had become a time of carnival and every white man, woman and child enjoyed it with enthusiasm. Even after all this happened, the irony lies in the point which Brown makes when he tells the readers that the coroner and the Sheriff after inspection and investigation, declared that Will was killed by "unknown hands." In the ballad form, Brown manages to depict the cruel history of African American mob lynchings.

*He didn't abuse Tom Wickley,
Said nothing when the white man curst,
But when Tom grabbed his gun, he pulled his own,
And his bullet got here first,
He was a man, and they laid him down.*

*Didn't catch him in no manhunt
But they took him from a hospital bed,
Stretched on his back in the nigger ward,
With a bullet wound in his head,
He was a man, and they laid him down.*

*It didn't come off at midnight
Nor yet at the break of the day,
It was in the broad noon daylight,
When they put po' Will away,
He was a man, and they laid him down.*

*They strung him up on main street,
On a tree in court house square,
And people came from miles around
To enjoy a holiday there,*

He was a man, and we'll lay him down.

*They hung him and they shot him,
They piled packing cases around,
They burnt up Will's black body,
Cause he shot a white man down;
"He was a man and we'll lay him down."*

*It wasn't no solemn business,
Was more like a barbeque,
The crackers yelled when the fire blazed,
And the women and the children too-
"He was a man, and we laid him down".*

*The Coroner and the Sheriff
Said "Death by Hands Unknown."
The mob broke up by midnight,
"Another uppity nigger gone-
He was a man, an' we laid him down." (265)*

Prof. Dr Katja Mierke from Fresenius University of Applied Sciences, Cologne notes in "A Social Psychology of Festival Crowds"² that the larger the mob will be, the greater will be the violence and more likely are people to follow group norms. These group norms can be very specific and range from being violent but also dancing wildly or eating more. The word barbeque used by Sterling Brown is used both literally and symbolically. Literally it meant the grilling of the victim whose skin colour was black and symbolically it meant a social gathering where whites would relish the idea of their supremacy.

In his poem "Let us Suppose," Brown uses an interesting technique. He asks the reader to imagine a particular condition of the African American which is different from his present condition. For example, in the first stanza the poet asks the readers to supposedly think that the African American person works in a much wider field than the present swampy fields where carrion crows fly over. He wants to increase the horizons of the negro's present socio-political condition in the second stanza so that his restless mind can gather more harvest. In the third stanza, the poet purposely dehumanises him and says that if the negro person in America would be a little passive, erase his self-esteem, negate his desire for fighting back then maybe the

² Quoted from: <http://go-group.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/A-Social-Psychology-of-Festival-Crowds-GoGroup-2016-Katja-Mierke.pdf>.

whites would not kill him. Brown wants us to think what the negro "could never be." By supposing these conditions, he is explaining to the readers the alienated condition of the negro. The negro needs to be an animal in front of the white man. He needs to be alienated from his fruits of labour, he needs to be alienated from his species being and from the desire of living a life, free from humiliation, free from commoditization and free from facing what Prof. Carol Sanders notes as white rage. So, Brown wants to suppose a condition which would not create this white rage and only then can a negro person be alive. This poem was also published in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*. Anne Price in the book *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond* notes that "Let us Suppose" was based on the September 26, 1933, lynching of John White, a young African American accused of rape in Opelousas, a part of Louisiana with a long history of racial violence".

*Let us suppose him differently placed
In wider fields than these bounded by bayous
And the fringes of moss-hung trees
Over which, in lazy spirals, the carancros [carrion crows]
soar and dip.*

*Let us suppose these horizons pushed farther,
So that his eager mind,
His restless senses, his swift eyes,
Could glean more than the sheaves he stored
Time and time again:
Let us suppose him far away from here.*

*Or let us, keeping him here, suppose him
More submissive, less ready for the torrent of hot Cajan
speech,
The clenched fist, the flushed face,
The proud scorn and the spurting anger;
Let us suppose him with his hat crumpled in his hand,
The proper slant to his neck, the eyes abashed,
Let us suppose his tender respect for his honour
Calloused, his debt to himself outlawed.*

Let us suppose him what he could never be.

*Let us suppose him less thrifty
Less the hustler from early morning until first dark,
Let us suppose his corn weedy,
His cotton rusty, scantily fruited, and his fat mules poor.
His cane a sickly yellow
Like his white neighbour's.*

*Let us suppose his burnt brick colour,
His shining hair thrown back from his forehead,
His stalwart shoulders, his lean hips,
His gently fused patois of Cajan, Indian, African,
Let us suppose these less the dragnet
To her, who might have been less lonesome
Less driven by Louisiana heat, by lone flat days,
And less hungry.*

*Let us suppose his full-throated laugh
Less repulsive to the crabbed husband,
Let us suppose his swinging strides
Less of an insult to the half-alive scarecrow
Of the neighbouring fields:
Let us suppose him less fermenting to hate.*

*Let us suppose that there had been
In this tiny forgotten parish, among these lost bayous,
No imperative need
Of preserving unsullied,
Anglo-Saxon mastery.*

*Let us suppose –
Oh, let us suppose him alive. (266)*

Sterling Brown was an important critic of African American conditions of suffering and by reading these poems there is an urgent need to reconstruct what is popularly known as the Reconstruction period in U.S.A. The reconstruction period, talks about the period after the Civil War where attempts were made to redress the alienated condition of African American slavery brought about by the politics of capitalism. These poems underline the fact that instead of reconstruction, there was a rebirth of slavery and an evolution of it under the Jim Crow laws and the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan. The library of Virginia reports:

Reconstruction was extremely unpopular among most Southern whites. White resistance following the war took several forms, among them the Klan and local legislation which supported the white establishment. The Klan was variously organized throughout the South as a white underground resistance to the forces of Reconstruction. In 1867, Nathan Bedford Forrest consolidated the Klan into the "Invisible Empire of the South." Dressed in white robes designed to frighten victims and protect the identity of the members, the Klan fought to restore white supremacy utilizing intimidation and direct violence against black freedmen and white supporters.³

³ The full report can be seen in the following link:
<https://www.lva.virginia.gov/exhibits/mitchell/jimcro.htm>.

Esther Popel was also one of the literary representative figures of the Harlem Renaissance and a good friend of Langston Hughes. She was a writer and editor of the N.A.A.C.P.'s journal named *The Crisis* and magazines like *The Opportunity* and *The Journal of Negro Education*. Her most important poem on lynching is "Flag Salute" which was a reaction to the lynching of George Armwood on 18th October, 1933 in Princess Anne, Maryland. The Maryland State Archives report notes that:

George Armwood was widely considered to be a very hard worker, uncomplaining, quiet, and generally well liked. He was also described as "feeble-minded." John Waters, a 21-year old who described himself as a friend of Armwood's said of him that "that guy was a little off at times." Waters suggested that this "feeble-mindedness" was at the root of a separate assault, when Armwood allegedly sexually assaulted an African American woman. That case occurred years before he was accused of attacking Mary Denston, but it was not investigated, some said because of the influence of Armwood's white employer, John H. Richardson. Armwood attended school until the age of fifteen, when according to his mother, "Mr. John H. Richardson, white, and his wife requested that George be given to them." The *Afro-American* wrote a piece referring to this arrangement after the lynching. The case seemed to resemble the Matthew Williams lynching case of 1931, when Williams, who was conceded by both coloured and white to be demented, but allowed to work at starvation wages until he allegedly slew his own employer and exploiter. The *Afro-American* asserted that several cognitively disabled African Americans were held in peonage, ignorance, and serfdom" on the Eastern Shore in what was "merely a polite term for slavery. After the alleged attack, Richardson reportedly aided Armwood in his escape. Armwood's mother mentioned that assertion in her interview with the *Afro* and the rumour was repeated by John Waters, who described the Richardsons as "his [Armwood's] white people" and said that Richardson helped George to get away from that mob which was hunting him. After Mary Denston reported the attempted assault, police in Somerset County organized a search party to look for George Armwood in the woods near where the incident took place. They questioned those in the area, and armed men searched the home of Armwood's mother Etta in Manokoo. George Armwood was found hiding in

the home of John H. Richardson. He was dragged across the field and beaten as he was taken into custody. Armwood's mother saw the beating from her house. She told reporters from the *Afro-American* that she feared he would be killed. Armwood was taken to the Salisbury prison, ten miles north of Princess Anne. After the lynching of Matthew Williams in 1931, lynch law had embarrassed Maryland authorities. The distance was not a guarantee of safety but it would put ten miles between George Armwood and potential lynchers in Princess Anne. However, by 5 o'clock the afternoon of Armwood's jailing in Salisbury, a white mob was forming. It was decided to move George Armwood. He would be shuttled from Cecil County to as far as Baltimore City in an effort to avoid mob violence. Somerset County Judge Robert F. Duer and State Attorney John Robins were pressured by their constituency to call for Armwood's return to the Eastern Shore. The two assured Governor Albert C. Ritchie that the justice of the courts would not be circumvented by terror and lynch law. Governor Ritchie assented, and Armwood was sent back to Princess Anne in the early morning of October 17. Despite the promises of Duer and Robins, the mob formed again at the jail once people heard of Armwood's returned. Judge Duer reportedly spoke to the crowd while he was en route to a dinner party. "I know nearly all of you," he told the crowd, going on to say that he was "one of them" and would hold the citizens "to their honor." The crowd initially dispersed in response to Duer's words, but it quickly reassembled. Deputy Norman Dryden, Captain Edward McKim Johnson, and 23 other officers guarding the jailhouse threw teargas into the mob. As the smoke cleared, the lynch mob used two fifteen-foot timbers as battering rams to breach the jailhouse doors. Captain Johnson was reportedly knocked unconscious and Deputy Dryden was forced to hand over the keys to the cells. Armwood hid under his mattress but was dragged out of his cell by the mob and a noose was placed around his neck. He was beaten, stabbed, and kicked, before he was tied to the back of a truck and driven to the place he would be hanged. Initially the mob favored a tree near Judge Duer's home, but instead they used a nearby tree on the property of ninety-one-year-old Thomas Bock. Before he was hanged, Armwood's ears were cut off and his gold teeth were ripped out. Armwood was reportedly dead by the time the mob raised and

dropped his body from a tree branch. The lynch mob dragged George Armwood's corpse back to the courthouse on the corner of Prince and William Street in downtown Princess Anne. His body was hanged from a telephone pole and burned. His corpse was dumped in Hayman's Lumber Yard, to be gathered by the authorities in the morning.⁴

The above newspaper report⁵ shows the incident of George Armwood. The poem is a critique on the American "Pledge of Allegiance" which states that "I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. This line from the pledge of allegiance is very farcical within the context of African American lives. In the poem "Flag Salute," Popel deconstructs this narrative.

*'I pledge allegiance to the flag'-
 'They dragged him naked
 'Through the muddy streets,
 'A feeble-minded black boy!
 'And the charge? Supposed assault
 'Upon an aged woman!
 "Of the United States of America'-
 'One mile they dragged him
 'Like a sack of meal,
 'A rope around his neck,
 'A bloody ear
 'Left dangling by the patriotic hand
 'Of Nordic youth! (A boy of seventeen!)
 "And to the Republic for which it stands'-
 'And then they hanged his body to a tree,
 'Below the window of the county judge
 'Whose pleadings for that battered human flesh
 'Were stifled by the brutish, raucous howls
 'Of men, and boys, and women with their babes,
 'Brought out to see the bloody spectacle
 'Of murder in the style of '33!
 ' (Three thousand strong, they were!)
 'One Nation, Indivisible'-
 To make the tale complete
 They built a fire-
 What matters that the stuff they burned
 Was flesh- and bone- and hair-
 And reeking gasoline!
 'With Liberty- and Justice'-
 They cut the rope in bits
 And passed them out,
 For souvenirs, among the men and boys!*

*The teeth no doubt, on golden chains
 Will hang
 About the favoured necks of sweethearts, wives,
 And daughters, mothers, sisters, babies, too!
 'For ALL!'⁶*

The poem is 37 lines long and it contains interesting interruptions from the pledge of Allegiance in the first, seventh, fourteenth, twenty third, twenty ninth and 37th line. If we read only these six lines as mentioned above, we will legibly be able to read the pledge. It is only when we read between these lines that the real picture of America is seen where the nation is very much divisible into Black America and White America, there is no liberty for the African American and neither is there any justice in the judicial system. Popel writes about Armwood being dragged naked through the muddy streets on the charge of a supposed assault of an elderly white woman. They dragged his body one mile "like a sack of meal" indicating the commoditization and alienation of the African American with a rope around his neck which cut his ear and left it dangling. Next his body was hung to a tree below the window of a county judge. Here lies the irony in the sense that this illegal and terroristic mob lynching was happening right under the judge's nose but he was paralysed in front of the lynch mob hence signifying the impotence of the American judicial system. Popel's lines "Of men, and boys, and women with their babes/Brought out to see the bloody spectacle" makes us remember McKay's "white fiends." After he was hung his body was burnt and then his body parts were cut for souvenirs and distributed amongst the gathered mob. This poem helps us to understand the empty phrases of the pledge of allegiance and the monstrosity of White Supremacist nationalism. This ideology did not consider the Black Community as human beings let alone considering them as fraternal netizens. This act can be interpreted as a blasphemy when seen in the context to the American Preamble which aspires to establish justice and ensure domestic tranquillity. Popel also thought about this fact when he wrote her poem "Blasphemy-American Style." In the first stanza of the poem, we hear the voice of the lynch gangs again saying "Look, God/ We've got a nigger here/ To burn." The next stanza proclaims that they are going to "plunge" this "goddamn nigger... To hell." When the victim shrieked in pain the mob was usually very happy and their faces smiled. The lynching of a black person can be compared to a carnival spirit. When Popel writes "Now

⁴ Quoted from:
<https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc3500/sc3520/013700/013750/html/13750bio.html>.

⁵ See the report in the following link:
<https://baltimorepostexaminer.com/two-cases-linked-in-history-galvanized-the-civil-rights-movement/2018/07/16>.

⁶ Quoted from: <http://archives.dickinson.edu/document-descriptions/flag-salute-esther-popel-shaw>.

watch him/Squirm and wriggle/While we swing him/from this tree,” the note of excitement of the spectators is discernible. The poet makes it clear that African Americans were not considered as human beings as in the next lines we see the image of a scared black person who is about to be lynched wanting to pray to God. Praying is a human act. People pray when they suffer, but this is also denied by the lynch mobs as they say “And listen, God, / You’ll laugh at this/I know/ He wants to pray/ Before we stage/ This show/He’s scared/ And can’t remember What to say Imagine, God, /A nigger try ‘in/To Pray”. According to the white people a black person praying is a very comic affair. Next Popel writes that the white people make fun of this person who is about to die by saying that he cannot even spell the words he is trying to say. This is when they start saying The Lord’s Prayer and asks the victim to repeat it. This is an image of imposition. Popel by writing this poem indicates how the white people used terrorist methods of social control and violent means of imposing their culture on the black people. Everything white was considered beautiful and everything black was interpreted as abominable. This poem is also one of the hopelessness of praying very similar to Langston Hughes’ poem “Song for A Dark Girl” published in 1927 when the latter says from the perspective of a black woman whose lover was hung from a “cross roads tree”.

The woman in that poem too talks about the futility of praying:

*I asked the white Lord Jesus
What was the use of prayer.
Way Down South in Dixie
(Break the heart of me)
Love is a naked shadow
On a gnarled and naked tree.⁷*

White terror through lynching, cut off the African American from the dignity of being human governed by the dictatorship of white supremacist ideology. We can, through an analysis of the poems above observe the link between Marx’s concept of alienation or “Entfremdung” whereby people are compelled to live in a dehumanized and a neurotic world of constant threat. The main theme of alienation it must be reiterated is the loss of the human self. This loss of the self is realised by observing lynching and being the victim of lynching. The violence was systematically carried out by the ideology of white supremacy supported by a capitalist system. Alongside “entfremdung” the Freudian concept of Unheimlich should also be mentioned. Unheimlich literally means “not of the home.” People who were brought into America as slaves

were not of the home-not from America. The ideology of white supremacy never considered black skin people as equal to white people. Although they were necessary to do the physical work, their contribution to the economy was never recognised and they were considered as alien to their culture and hence if an African American wanted to enter the mainstream of American society, violence was a necessity to marginalise or terminate them. Thus, racial capitalism promotes alienation and this viewing of the African American as the emergence of the uncanny or unheimlich is located within the co-ordinates of white supremacy. Capital, as Marx notes in Chapter 31 of Volume 1 of *Das Kapital* comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt. In the U.S.A we saw the blood dripping from the body of the African American and the dirt which they had to kiss after being lynched and burnt. There is a famous jazz song, sung by Billy Holiday, named “Strange Fruit,” which was initially composed as a poem by a teacher, songwriter, and a member of the American Communist Party- Abel Meeropol. It talks about the strangeness of the African American condition, dehumanised, alienated, and terrorised:

*Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.*

*Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of Magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.*

*Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.⁸*

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- [2] Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*. Penguin Books Ltd, 2023.

⁷ Quoted from: <https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/song-dark-girl>.

⁸ Quoted from: <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~davink/ANALYTICAL/Holiday.html>.