

87. TO WALDO FRANK

N.D. [EARLY TO MID-
JANUARY 1923]

[Ts.: Van Pelt]

Brother,¹

Even before last fall I am certain that you saw race and color as surfaces. Perhaps your mind still retained a few inhibiting wraiths. But the fact is, that you were *ready* for the miracle to happen. For myself, I could sense no dissonance or qualification whatsoever. I dont look for these things. I dont have to. If they're there, I simply *know* it. Nothing could have been more natural and real than our experience in Spartanburg. And the difficulties were extreme. All along, your consciousness of life was been [*sic*] too deep and strong a thing to suffer

restrictions and distortions. I felt this (in a vague way, of course) during the hour we had in Central Park. Our America sharpened the impression. After I had read Rahab and the Dark Mother, I then seemed to know. Without this knowing I doubt if I would ever have sent those mss. Or if I had sent them, they would have been in the nature of a test. My sending them to you was a natural step in their *expression*. And so it is with CANE. There is not another man in the world that I would let touch it. Any more than I would let someone write Karintha or Kabnis for me. You not only understand CANE; you are *in* it, specifically here and there, mystically because of the spiritual bond there is between us. When you write, you will express me, and in a very true way you will express yourself. This combination I believe to produce the only worthwhile Introduction.²

Sherwood Anderson has doubtless had a very deep and beautiful emotion by way of the Negro. Here and there he has succeeded in expressing this. But he is not satisfied. He wants more. He is hungry for it. I come along. I express it. It is natural for him to see me in terms of this expression. I see myself that way. But also I see myself expressing *myself*, expressing *Life*. I expect artists to recognize the circle of expression. When they dont, I'm not disappointed; I simply know that in this respect they are second-rate. That in this respect they differ but little from the mass which must narrow and caricature if it is to grasp the thing at all. Sherwood's notes are very deep and sincere. Hence I attribute his attitude to a natural limitation. This limitation, extended, is noticeable in the bulk of his work. The range of his sensitivity, curiosity, and intelligence is not very wide. One's admiration suffers, but one's personal liking need not be affected by this.

There is one thing about the Negro in America which most thoughtful persons seem to ignore: the Negro is in solution, in the process of solution. As an entity, the race is loosing [*sic*] its body, and its soul is approaching a common soul. If one holds his eyes to individuals and sections, race is starkly evident, and racial continuity seems assured. One is even led to believe that the thing we call Negro beauty will always be attributable to a clearly defined physical source. But the fact is, that if anything comes up now, pure Negro, it will be a swan-song. Dont let us fool ourselves, brother: the Negro of the folk-song has all but passed away: the Negro of the emotional church is fading. A hundred years from now these Negroes, if they exist at all will live in art. And I believe that a vague sense of this fact is the driving force behind the art movements directed towards them today. (Likewise the Indian). America needs these elements. They are passing. Let us grab and hold them while there still is time. Segregation and laws may retard this solution. But in the end, segregation will either give way, or it will kill. Natural preservations do not come from unnatural laws.

The supreme fact of mechanical civilization is that you become a part of it, or get sloughed off (under). Negroes have no culture to resist it with (and if they had, their position would be identical to that of the Indians), hence industrialism the more readily transforms them. A few generations from now, the Negro will still be dark, and a portion of his psychology will spring from this fact, but in all else he will be a conformist to the general outlines of American civilization, or of American chaos. In my own stuff, in those pieces that come nearest to the old Negro, to the spirit saturate with folk-song: *Karintha* and *Fern*, the dominant emotion is a sadness derived from a sense of fading, from a knowledge of my futility to check solution. There is nothing about these pieces of the buoyant expression of a new race. The folk-songs themselves are of the same order. The deepest of them. "I aint got long to stay here." Religiously: "I (am going) to cross over into camp ground."³ Socially: "my position here is transient. I'm going to die, or be absorbed."

When I come up to Seventh Street and Theatre, a wholly new life confronts me. A life, I am afraid, that Sherwood Anderson would not get his beauty from. For it is jazzed, strident, modern. Seventh Street is the song of crude new life. Of a new people. Negro? Only in the *boldness* of its expression. In its healthy freedom. American. For the shows that please Seventh Street make their fortunes on Broadway. And both Theatre and Box-Seat, of course, spring from a complex civilization, and are directed to it. And *Kabnis* is *Me*. *Holiday*? Brother, you are weaving yourself into the truth of the South in a most remarkable way. You need it to complete your own spiritual experience. Because of your need, a beauty that is in solution will continue to live.

Jean

1. This letter seems to follow from his discussion of Sherwood Anderson in the previous letter, and he seems not to have yet read *Holiday*, which Frank sent in mid-January.
2. Frank had asked, in an undated letter, "would you rather I didn't write the intro? I have so many enemies, brother mine, that perhaps you'd be better off without my open sponsorship. In that case, be frank. Don't misunderstand. I want to do it, but I don't want this pleasure that wd be mine to stand in your way." Frank to Toomer, n.d., Jean Toomer Papers, box 3, folder 83.
3. Lyric from the African American spiritual "Deep River," which Toomer returned to in "Kabnis."