

A  
Jean Toomer  
Reader

*Selected Unpublished Writings*

*Edited by*

FREDERIK L. RUSCH

New York Oxford  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

1993

that he doubted that the time was ripe for the projection of such a symbol for a general movement towards a fundamental Americanization of all American people.

I, however, felt that the time was ripe. Already I had written quite a bit on the matter, and now I began gathering my materials and set about definitely to produce a book on America in general with the racial vision given what in my way of thinking is its proportionate place and value. \* \* \*

[1932?]

## The New Race

### A New Race in America

There is a new race in America. I am a member of this new race. It is neither white nor black nor in-between. It is the American race, differing as much from white and black as white and black differ from each other. It is possible that there are Negro and Indian bloods in my descent along with English, Spanish, Welsh, Scotch, French, Dutch, and German. This is common in America; and it is from all these strains that the American race is being born. But the old divisions into white, black, brown, red, are outworn in this country. They have had their day. Now is the time of the birth of a new order, a new vision, a new ideal of man. I proclaim this new order. My marriage to Margery Latimer is the marriage of two Americans.

[1931]

Letter to James Weldon Johnson

1447 North Dearborn St  
Chicago Ill  
July 11 30

Dear Mr Johnson,

My view of this country sees it composed of people who primarily are Americans, who secondarily are of various stocks or mixed stocks. The matter of descent, and of divisions presumably based on descents, has

been given, in my opinion, due emphasis, indeed over-emphasis. I aim to stress the fact that we all are Americans. I do not see things in terms of Negro, Anglo-Saxon, Jewish, and so on. As for me personally, I see myself an American, simply an American.

As regards art I particularly hold this view. I see our art and literature as primarily American art and literature. I do not see it as Negro, Anglo-Saxon, and so on.

Accordingly, I must withdraw from all things which emphasize or tend to emphasize racial or cultural divisions. I must align myself with things which stress the experiences, forms, and spirit we have in common.

This does not mean that I am necessarily opposed to the various established racial or sociological groupings. Certainly it does not mean that I am opposed to the efforts and forces which are trying to make these groups creative. On the contrary, I affirm these efforts. I recognize, for example, that the Negro art movement has had some valuable results. It is, however, for those who have and who will benefit by it. It is not for me. My poems are not Negro poems, nor are they Anglo-Saxon or white or English poems. My prose, likewise. They are, first, mine. And, second, in so far as general race or stock is concerned, they spring from the result of racial blendings here in America which have produced a new race or stock. We may call this stock the American stock or race. My main energies are devoted and directed towards the building of a life which will include all creative people of corresponding type.

I take this opportunity of noting these things in order to clear up a misunderstanding of my position which has existed to some extent ever since the publishing of CANE. I am stating the same things whenever opportunity allows to everyone concerned. I feel that just now the time is ripe to give a definite expression of these views.

My best wishes for your anthology; and my warm regards to you and Mrs Johnson.

Sincerely,

Jean Toomer

### *The Americans*

The strength of a country can be measured by its ability to digest, assimilate, and transform all the diverse materials present in it. The health of a country is dependent upon the right flowing of its digestive processes. The achievement of a country occurs when it has transformed all of its

food into blood, a blood unique to itself, and when, from the life of this blood it produces people, bodies and souls, and customs and culture special to it. This is true of the individual members of a nation. It is true of the nation as a whole. A country is like a huge stomach into which enters all kinds of materials, some unusable, some usable; and its existence is maintained, it is nourished, it grows and develops by subjecting these materials to the processes of digestion and assimilation, rejecting unusable matters, incorporating usable materials into its structures and functions. \* \* \*

There must be death before there can be new life. The materials themselves need not die, but the forms in which they previously existed must be broken down before these materials can enter as elements of new forms with new life. When we pick and eat an apple that it [sic] is the end of the apple. The apple dies. But that is the beginning of us, in so far as we are embodiments of the elements which previously existed in the apple-form.

Some foods, in relation to some eaters, do not noticeably resist dying and being eaten. The apple does not noticeably resist us. But certain foods, such for example as race-forms, though entering the stomach of a nation, do resist. This resistance both retards and stimulates the appetite, it both retards and stimulates digestion and assimilation. But the nation eats them. The race-forms die. They must die before there can be new life. In America, the white race, the black race, the red race, the brown race must die before there can be a new race. They are dying. America is eating them. They are dead. America has eaten them. This is the tendency. The tending here is to break up all old racial forms and incorporate their materials for the forming of a new racial form with new life.

It has been said that America is a melting-pot. Rather I would view it as a stomach. Rather I would view it as the place where mankind, long dismembered into separate usually repellant groupings, long scattered over the face of the earth, is being re-assembled into one whole and undivided human race. America will include the earth.

There is a new race here. For the present we may call it the American race. That, to date, not many are aware of its existence, that they do not realize that they themselves belong to it—this does not mean it does not exist; it simply means it does not yet exist for them because they, under the suggestion of hypnotic labels and false beliefs, are blind to it. But these labels and beliefs will die. They too must and will die. And the sight of people will be freed from them, and the people will become less blind and they will use their sight and see.

This new race is neither white nor black nor red nor brown. These are old terms for old races, and they must be discarded. This is a new race;

and though to some extent, to be sure, white and black and red and brown strains have entered into its formation, we should not view it as part white, part black, and so on. For when different elements come together in chemicobiological blendings, a new substance is produced, a new substance with new qualities in a new form. Water, though composed of two parts of hydrogen and one part of oxygen, is not hydrogen and oxygen; it is *water*, a new substance with a new form produced by the blending of hydrogen and oxygen. So the blending of different racial strains, taking place in the geographical setting of the American continent, has given rise to a new race which is uniquely itself. Save in the case of those who only recently have come here, it includes *everyone* in this country.

The biological process has already taken place. And, despite sociological resistance, it will inevitably continue to take place. Our views and our consciences are far behind and often untrue to the physical facts. We often speak as there were only white races, black, red and brown races here. True enough, on the sociological plane, that is, in terms of our social groupings, there are what we call white, black, red and brown groups. But I am speaking now of the biological actuality which underlies these social groups. There is white and red and brown blood in the so-called black group. This is generally recognized. There is white and black blood in the so-called red group. This too is recognized. There is red and black blood in the so-called white group. The red blood in the white group is somewhat recognized. The black blood in the white group is not. At the present time our psychology is such that it would be more painful than drawing an eye-tooth to draw from people this recognition. This is the American racial neurosis.

People with, as it is said, black blood in their veins, have been entering, passing into the white group for several centuries. So true is it that there is black blood in the white group that if the entire black group were to be destroyed, the black blood already present in so-called white people would continue circulating throughout the future history of the country, thinning out but spreading wider and wider as the years rolled on. And, on the other hand, should the white group be destroyed, the white blood already present in the so-called black group would continue circulating through America's history, similarly thinning out but spreading wider and wider as the years rolled on.

So much has the biological process taken place, so thoroughly are the various strains mingled and blended, that no living American knows but what he has all the various strains in him. If he has not, it is more than likely that his progeny will have.

Only, as I say, these strains do not exist in unblended parts. They are

organically combined more closely than hydrogen and oxygen are in water. When we thoughtlessly say of a person that he is half white and half black, or part Jewish and part Gentile, it sounds as if we thought or believed that white blood was in one half of his body and black blood in the other half, that Jewish blood was in his right side while Gentile blood was in his left. But this is only a manner of speaking. And we speak in this manner only because we have not thought about it, only because we speak loosely and inaccurately, and only because our psyches are in parts and in chaos and we unconsciously assume that our body is as unintegrated as our psyche. In this person of so-called mixed blood, in his body, the bloods have combined to form a new uniform blood. It is not white plus black, or Jewish plus Gentile. It is itself, a third thing, a different and unique substance with unique attributes. Moreover it is a mistake to speak of blood as if it had various colors in the various races. All human blood is the same. When we use color adjectives what we really are referring to are skin pigmentations. This is one of our main troubles. We see a surface and assume it is a center. We see a color or a label or a picture and assume it is a person.

The above fact, namely, that blood blendings give rise to new blood need not alarm anyone, not even those who have prided themselves on racial purity. For just this purity, just the uniqueness which they cherish, has itself come about as a result of a blending of various strains. The present day English people are, according to some students of the matter, the product of the blending of fifteen or more different strains. From the point of view of descent, we all are mixed blooded. No one knows, or can possibly know, all of the different racial elements, entering through his millions of ancestors, which he now, in a manner of speaking, embodies. From the point of view of our present existence, we all are pure blooded.

There is only one pure race—and this is the *human* race. We all belong to it—and this is the most and the least that can be said of any of us with accuracy. For the rest, it is mere talk, mere labelling, merely a manner of speaking, merely a sociological, not a biological, thing. I myself merely talk when I speak of the blending of the bloods of the white, black, red and brown races giving rise to a new race, to a new unique blood, when I liken the combination of these strains to the combination of hydrogen and oxygen producing water. For the blood of all the races is *human* blood. There are no differences between the blood of a Caucasian and the blood of a Negro as there are between hydrogen and oxygen. In the mixing and blending of so-called races there are mixtures and blending of the same stuff. When members of the human race, whatever their skin pigmentations, whatever their labels, whatever their different psycho-

logical behavior, meet and mingle there can only result other members of the human race.

So what I really mean by the American race is the human race—again the human race. The real and main difference between this new American group and previous groups will be found, necessarily not in blood, but in *consciousness*. Be of "white" blood, purely so; be of "black" blood, purely so; be of "red" or "brown" bloods, purely so; or be a blend of them. It is all the same stuff. And the same stuff added to or combined with the same stuff results in the same stuff. In America we have a new body. And, having recognized this, let [us] forget it. Let us forget that. Let us be born above the body. The important thing is consciousness. Here, in this country, among the people I refer to, the human essence, *humanness*, is again to be realized and emphasized. After having for years been hypnotized by labels and suggestions to believe we were less than human, merely Caucasian, or Mongolian, or Negroid, merely African, Russian, Italian, Spanish, French, English, or American; after having been identified with these surfaces, we are emerging from these limitations, we are waking up, we are nonidentifying from surfaces and from the preferences and prejudices associated with them, and we are realizing our basic human stock, our human essence, our humanness, our fundamental and universal humanity. Those who have or who are approaching this [sensing?], this realization—these are the ones I mean when I say Americans. These Americans are not of America only; they are of the earth. And, with various [titles?] in various countries they of course exist in other national groups. These are the [natural?] conscious internationalists.

[no date]

### Oppose the Force, Not the Man

I have heard Negroes protest that they are held down by white people. I have heard white people protest that they are held back by Negroes. The common factor of both statements is that each and both feel they are held. It is precisely this common factor that, in my way of thinking, is to be realized by both. Though they are held in different ways, they are bound in the same way. If you and I come to grips you may be stronger and have an advantage in the tussle, but the central fact is that both of us grip and are gripped and so remain as long as the fight lasts, powerless to stop, powerless to really separate and go our ways, powerless in short to do anything else.

Let us note, moreover, that Negro and white or whoever is so held, both feel that they are being held to their detriment. Both feel the damaging effects of the binding force. But neither, of course, understand [sic] that it is precisely a force that is holding them. Therefore they do not and indeed cannot truly get together to overcome their common enemy. No, each separatistically [sic] blames the other. The only solution that occurs to them is also cast in the mould of separatism. The white man would break away from the Negro, or further suppress him, or, in extreme cases, murder him. The Negro would fight the white or undermine him in some way. Such measures are evidently doomed to failure. You cannot resolve the problems of separation by operating within the force of separatism. Nor can you genuinely break from slavery by opposing people who are as much its victims as you yourself are.

Oppose the force, not the man. Oppose, both in yourself and in the other human being, that part of yourself and that part of him which acts as the agent of the force of separation and the force of binding. Cooperate with, both in yourself and in the other man, that part of yourself and that part of him which represents the good man, the decent human being who desires to be friend, who wants companionship, understanding, development, and some measure of real freedom. Let the other man do the same thing for himself and towards you. The forces of separatism and binding could not long withstand such a league of human beings, so dedicated.

[no date]

### Mankind Means Brotherhood

By Creation we are brothers in being. By Nature we are brothers in the flesh. We *are* this way, even though in all too many of our habits we act as if we were not. Human Being means brotherhood, and will forever mean brotherhood, even though in our lives we continue to distort, pervert, and do violence to this meaning.

The reality is not wanting, nor is it at fault. We are wanting. We are at fault for not realizing the reality.

Mankind is one kind. Those of one kind are essentially brothers, whether they know it or not. Our knowing, or our lack of knowing, does not affect the reality. *But knowledge or ignorance on our part does vitally promote or impede the manifestation of the reality.*

We were designed, and now are designed, to be moved and related each to the other by love, faith, and conscience. It is our faulty condition-