1619 Project Discussion
Article Packet

Topic: Slavery and America Part 4: 1619-1699

February 10, 2022

6:30 – 8:00 pm

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March 10, 2022
Slavery in America Part 5: 1939 – 1979
Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America 1619-2019

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1859–1864

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

ADAM SERWER

BY 1859, FREDERICK DOUGLASS WAS A FUGITIVE AGAIN.

The formerly enslaved Douglass had famously escaped bondage in 1838, fled north, and become one of the most eloquent abolitionist orators in the country. But in October 1859 his friend John Brown had led a failed raid on the federal arsenal in Harper's Ferry, Virginia, hoping to start a slave insurrection and end the peculiar institution for good. Douglass knew of Brown's scheme but had declined to participate. Yet his association with Brown had made him a wanted man, and he fled to Britain rather than face trial in Virginia.

Douglass would later write in his autobiography *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* that he felt Brown "was about to rivet the fetters more firmly than ever on the limbs of the enslaved." Despite Brown's entreaties, Douglass recalled, "my discretion or my cowardice made me proof against the dear old man's eloquence—perhaps it was something of both which determined my course."

As for his escape, "I knew if my enemies could not prove me guilty of the offence of being with John Brown, they could prove that I was Frederick Douglass," the orator wrote, "and I knew that all Virginia, were I once in her clutches, would say 'Let him be hanged.'" He took pleasure in the irony, however, that it was the men who wanted him clapped in chains who would themselves soon rise up in armed insurrection. Perhaps, Douglass wrote, the Democrats on the Senate committee investigating Brown's failed rebellion "saw that by using their

senatorial power in search of rebels they might be whetting a knife for their own throats."

If Brown was a lone radical in 1859, several events would enlist the North in a quest for the violent abolition of slavery by 1861. In the interim, Douglass had quietly returned to the United States to mourn the death of his ten-year-old daughter, Annie. As the Southern Confederacy rose, each state proclaiming the principle of human bondage at the center of the rebellion, Douglass was convinced the North would ultimately see the necessity of abolishing slavery. After all, the catalyst for the South's secession was the election of Abraham Lincoln, who by that point had merely vowed to limit slavery's expansion, not to abolish it. But if the South could not maintain its control over American democracy through the expansion of slave states, then it would destroy it through insurrection.

During this period, Douglass became more than just an orator or a journalist: he became a prophet of a United States who embodied the courage of its convictions, a country that, as Douglass put it, "shall not brand the Declaration of Independence as a lie." At the time, it was horror to the white South and a foolish dream to much of the white North. Today Douglass's vision of America is so pervasive that even its strongest opponents pretend to believe in it: an America that actually recognizes that all are created equal, where the rights of citizenship are not abridged on the basis of accidents of birth.

"The republic was undergoing a second founding, and Douglass felt more than ready to be one of its fathers," historian David Blight writes in his biography of Douglass. "The old nation might now be bludgeoned into ruin, and a new one imagined."

Yet Douglass also understood intimately that much of the white North, and not just the South, would have to drastically revise its vision of America. Although Northern states had abolished slavery, most had also severely restricted Black rights and suffrage. Right up until the beginning of the war, many Northern whites, even those hostile to slavery, saw abolitionists as just as culpable for the sectional conflict as slave owners. Abolitionists faced murder, censorship, and mob violence, even in Northern states like Pennsylvania and New Hampshire.

In his speeches and writings, Douglass laid out his vision of this new America. "We stand in our place today and wage war, not merely for our selves, but for the whole world; not for this generation, but for unborn generations, and for all time," Douglass declared in his "Mission of the War" speech in 1864. The North, Douglass insisted, was "like the south, fighting for National unity; a unity of which the great principles of liberty and equality, and not slavery and class superiority, are the corner stone."

One of the most crucial developments in what Douglass hoped, and many in the white North feared, would become an "abolition war" was the recruitment of Black soldiers. By 1862, President Abraham Lincoln had authorized the recruitment of Black troops, and two of Douglass's sons, Charles and Lewis, had enlisted. But the Northern reaction to that decision illustrated another one of Douglass's observations, that an America that truly lived up to its own beliefs would have to confront prejudice in the North as much as rebellion in the South.

"The recruitment of black soldiers did not produce an instantaneous change in northern racial attitudes. Indeed, to some degree it intensified the Democratic backlash against emancipation and exacerbated racial tensions in the army," the historian James McPherson writes in *Battle Cry of Freedom*. "The black regiments reflected the Jim Crow mores of the society that reluctantly accepted them: they were segregated, given less pay than white soldiers, commanded by white officers some of whom regarded their men as 'niggers,' and intended for use mainly as garrison and labor battalions."

Douglass was no stranger to such attitudes. "It came to be a no[t] uncommon thing to hear men denouncing South Carolina and Massachusetts in the same breath," Douglass wrote, "and in the same measure of disapproval." He had faced jeering racist mobs at his Northern speeches; he had bitterly denounced the Lincoln administration's flirtations with "colonizing" the Black population of the United States to Africa; and he had warned the proslavery "peace camp" that "as to giving the slave States new guarantees for the safety of slavery . . . the South does not want them, and the North could not give them if the South could accept them."

When Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Douglass would get his abolition war. Yet Douglass understood that many in the North believed that "abolition, though now a vast power, is still odious." Such people, he said, "despise the only measure that can save the country"—that is, the end of slavery.

Douglass predicted in 1863 that "a mightier work than the abolition of slavery" lay ahead. This was an understatement. The lingering hatred of abolition and racial equality, North and South, would eventually cement into a fierce opposition to Black political rights. Early in Reconstruction, Douglass would be provided with a glimpse of the North's lingering ambivalence toward Black freedom. Elected a delegate to the National Loyalists' Convention in 1866, he would be urged by his Republican colleagues not to attend.

"They dreaded the clamor of social equality and amalgamation which would be raised against the party, in consequence of this startling innovation," Douglass wrote of it years later. "They, dear fellows, found it much more agreeable to talk of the principles of liberty as glittering generalities, than to reduce those principles to practice."

Southern rebellion had forced the Union to adopt Brown's methods for the abolition of slavery, but it was nevertheless a long way from Douglass's vision of inclusive nationhood. Only Southern intransigence and violent resistance would persuade Republicans in Congress to adopt the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments, establishing birthright citizenship and barring discrimination in voting on the basis of race. Although a believer in woman suffrage, Douglass would endure a bitter split with his white feminist allies, who saw the Fifteenth Amendment's enfranchisement of Black men but not women as a grave insult, disgusted that "Patrick, Sambo, Hans, and Yung Tung" would be enfranchised before them.

But the freedoms of the Reconstruction amendments would be short-lived, at least for Black people. Whether because of the terrorism of the white supremacist so-called Redeemers in the South who overthrew the Reconstruction governments by force and intimidation, or because of the Republican-appointed Supreme Court justices who rendered the Reconstruction amendments to the Constitution

useless to the emancipated, Douglass's dream of a new nation proved more elusive than it must have seemed at the war's end.

"The Reconstruction amendments do not occupy the prominent place in public consciousness of other pivotal documents of our history, such as the Bill of Rights and Declaration of Independence," the historian Eric Foner has written. "But even if we are unaware of it, Reconstruction remains part of our lives, or to put it another way, key issues confronting American society today are in some ways Reconstruction questions."

Even today, American political conflicts are defined by the limits of American citizenship and who is allowed to claim it. In this sense, Douglass understood that until Black Americans could claim full citizenship, the nation he envisioned could not exist.

"Men talk of the Negro problem. There is no Negro problem," Douglass declared in 1894, as the shadow of Jim Crow fell across the nation. "The problem is whether the American people have honesty enough, loyalty enough, honor enough, patriotism enough to live up to their Constitution." More than a century later, that problem is still with us.

1864–1869

THE CIVIL WAR

JAMELLE BOUIE

BY AUGUST 1864, AS GENERAL WILLIAM T. SHERMAN PREPARED his forces for an assault on Atlanta, nearly 400,000 enslaved people had escaped to Union lines. They had won themselves freedom in the process.

As fighting intensified, tens of thousands would join the Union Army as soldiers alongside their freeborn counterparts. By the war's end, approximately 180,000 African Americans fought in thirty-nine major engagements as soldiers in the U.S. Colored Troops.

But the significance of Black soldiers went beyond their military prowess. Every revolution produces a class of people committed to its fulfillment. The Civil War was no exception. The free and freed men who took up arms for the Union would, in the war's aftermath, become an important force for equal rights and democracy, part of a vanguard of Americans who fought to give meaning to the great sacrifice of the war.

At the start of the Civil War, the Lincoln administration didn't want Black soldiers. When "300 reliable colored free citizens" of Washington, D.C., offered to defend the city from Confederate attack, the War Department rejected them. Likewise, at various points in 1861 and 1862, President Lincoln pushed back against efforts to arm former slaves. When battlefield commanders tried to organize Black regiments in Kansas, occupied Louisiana, and the Sea Islands of South Carolina, the Lincoln administration refused to authorize them.

Lincoln's resistance was met with the pressure and advocacy of abolitionists, Black leaders, and radical Republicans. These advocates made the case that the Union could win the war and end slavery if it embraced African Americans as soldiers.

Lincoln eventually relented. On January 1, 1863, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves in all the seceded states except specified areas of Louisiana and Virginia. The proclamation also stated that former slaves would be "received into armed service of the United States to garrison forts" and "to man vessels of all sorts." Black enlistment had arrived. By March, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton had sent Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas to organize regiments of African American soldiers in the Mississippi Valley. Other army camps sprang up near Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., where thousands of Black Americans enlisted.

Black soldiers fought and died under the Union flag. In doing so, they didn't just help win the war and abolish slavery, they also set the terms for the aftermath. Frederick Douglass recognized this: "Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters, U.S.; let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket," declared Douglass in 1863, "and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship."

Service to the nation gave Black Americans a claim on freedom and citizenship. Lincoln recognized this, too, in an 1863 letter. "If they stake their lives for us they must be prompted by the strongest motive—even the promise of freedom. And the promise being made, must be kept."

And then there were the soldiers. In fighting for the freedom of themselves and their families, many of the men of the U.S. Colored Troops came to understand themselves as political actors, committed to the Union cause, to republican government, and to the values of American democracy.

You could see this on the ground when African American soldiers interacted with freed people. As part of the federal occupying force in the South, notes the historian Eric Foner, Black soldiers emerged as "apostles of black equality," spreading "ideas of land ownership and political equality" among the former slaves.

Indeed, the first years of Reconstruction saw intense struggle and rapid social change across the South. But the most dramatic transformations were in those towns and cities and villages where Black troops and Black veterans inspired local confidence and sparked political mobilization. Historian Steven Hahn notes how, in one district of Charleston, South Carolina, in 1867, hundreds of Black laborers had assembled as a military company, wearing "old army uniforms," marching and drilling, for the sake of protecting themselves and negotiating better prices with landowning planters.

It's too much to say that Black soldiers and veterans were the driving force behind the political organization of freed people. Black men, women, and children of all ages played important and critical roles in shaping and sustaining communities as they embarked on new paths forged by freedom. But Black soldiers and veterans had an important role in particular forms of mobilization. By 1868, most Union-occupied areas of the former Confederate South had vibrant Union Leagues, formed to "protect, strengthen, and defend all loyal men without regard to sect, condition, or race" as well as to sponsor political events and provide forums for discussion among freed people.

Black veterans of the Civil War were among the key organizers for Union Leagues, traveling throughout the South to help mobilize rural Blacks into organizations that quickly became tools for collective empowerment and defense. Working through Union Leagues, freed people established schools, opened cooperative stores, and mobilized to challenge white political power at a local level.

Black soldiers and veterans were also at the forefront of the monumental effort in 1867 and 1868 to craft new constitutions for the former Confederate states. A substantial number of delegates to these constitutional conventions had been enslaved themselves. And many had come to prominence and leadership through their activities in the Union Army, their participation in the Union Leagues, and their efforts to organize their communities for mutual benefit. The importance of these new constitutions cannot be overstated. They were the foundation for a new kind of democracy, one rooted in equal citizenship and full civil standing, one with new opportunities, and new possibilities, for freed people throughout the South.

The 1868 election was the first one where African Americans had a say in the nation's next president. Not surprisingly, prospective Black voters in the South faced vigilante violence from whites who wanted to reestablish the hierarchies and relations of the antebellum past. It was against this violence that Black soldiers and veterans, again, stepped into the fray. In New Orleans, for example, "several republican clubs of colored men, in uniform, with torches and a drum corps, paraded through the streets" to the county courthouse to cast their ballot.

The second half of the 1860s, from the late years of the Civil War to the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson and the start of Radical Reconstruction, was one of the most tumultuous periods in American history, a time of rapid, unprecedented change across the entire society. African Americans, free and freed, played a critical, world-historical part in driving that change.

It's in that fulcrum of transformation that Black soldiers were a revolutionary force. By joining the conflict, they turned a war for union into a war for emancipation. In the wake of the fighting, as millions worked to build a new society in the South, they helped guide, organize, and defend. In doing so, they established a tradition: not just of military service, but of using the fruits of that service to help secure rights for the community at large. It's why, when Black Americans mobilized themselves to challenge racism and race hierarchy in the twentieth century, Black soldiers would again be at the forefront of the struggle, urging "double victory," against tyranny both abroad and at home.

1869–1874

RECONSTRUCTION

MICHAEL HARRIOT

WHAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO READ IS THE STORY OF THE FIRST war on terror.

No . . . wait.

This is actually the origin story of second-wave white supremacy known as "Jim Crow laws."

This is a war narrative. This is a horror story, but it's also a suspense thriller that ends in triumph. It also ends in tragedy. It's a true story about a fantastic myth. This is a narrative, nonfiction account of the all-American fairy tale of liberty and justice for all.

Behold, the untold story of the Great American Race War.

Before we begin, we shall introduce our hero.

The hero of this drama is Black people. *All Black people.* The free Blacks; the uncloaked maroons; the Black elite; the preachers and reverends; the doormen and doctors; the sharecroppers and soldiers—they are all protagonists in our epic adventure.

Spoiler alert: the hero of this story does not die.

Ever.

This hero is long-suffering but unkillable. Bloody *and* unbowed. In this story—and in all the subsequent sequels, now and forever—this hero almost never wins. But we still get to be the heroes of all true American stories simply because we are indestructible. Try as they might, we will never be extinguished.

Ever.

Our story begins at the end of the War for White Supremacy.

Also known as the "War for Slaveholders' Rights"; the "War of White Tears"; or more recently, "Conflict for Future Racist Monuments." Demographic historian David J. Hacker contends that this war's death toll could possibly outweigh the combined total of all the casualties of the nation's other wars. (Whatever one chooses to call it, just remember: no war is civil.)

By 1869, the worst fears of the Confederate white supremacists had all come true.

The Thirteenth and Fourteenth amendments to the U.S. Constitution had been ratified, abolishing slavery, guaranteeing citizenship, and promising equal protection under the law. The treasonous states that previously decided they didn't want to be a part of the United States if they couldn't own Black people were now occupied by Union troops, some led by Black freedmen. Then came the last straw:

On February 26, 1869, the U.S. Congress passed the proposal that would become the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, proclaiming that the right to vote "shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the legislation resulted in more than 700,000 Black people registered as voters, slightly outnumbering the number of white voters in the South. In some states, the Black population equaled or surpassed the white population. But for the first time in decades, white Democrats—the original racists—were a minority in the South.

Something had to be done, so they started a war.

While many historians describe Reconstruction as a period of "racial unrest" marked by lynchings and "race riots," it was undoubtedly a war. The network of terror cells that sprang up during Reconstruction was no different from the organized militias of the American Revolution or the ragtag Confederate squads. Although they went by many names, including the White League, the White Knights, the Knights of the White Camellia, and—the most famous of all—the "Circle of Brothers" known as the Ku Klux Klan, the loose confederation of historically white fraternities had one common goal: to overthrow the government and create their own white supremacist state.

Ku Klux Klan members in North Carolina lynched so many Black

voters in 1870 that Governor William Woods Holden declared an insurrection and suspended habeas corpus (the right against unlawful detention), imposing martial law in two counties. After Klansmen assassinated Republican state senator John W. Stephens—along with Wyatt Outlaw, a Black town commissioner—Holden had no choice but to hire Union colonel George Washington Kirk to quell the violence. Kirk and three hundred soldiers traveled to North Carolina, arresting some of the most prominent men in the state for conspiring with the Klan—including ex-congressman John Kerr—for fueling what would become known as the Kirk-Holden War.

But the Klan's rampage worked.

Battered by rampant murder and intimidation, the Tarheel State's Black voters were successfully suppressed in the 1870 statewide elections. When Democrats won control of the state legislature, their first order of business was to impeach Holden for treating Klansmen too harshly. None of the more than one hundred terror leaders arrested in the Kirk-Holden War were ever charged with a crime. But on December 4, 1870, William Woods Holden became the first governor in American history to be removed from office.

North Carolina's Klansmen had successfully overthrown their state's government.

It was not the first time, and it would not be the last.

In June 1869, thirty-three Georgia legislators were officially removed from office when the state's supreme court ruled 2–1 that "there is no existing law of this State which confers the right upon the colored citizens thereof to hold office." The decision, however, was largely ceremonial. By the time the court handed down the decision, the Klan had already driven the "Original 33" from office, slaughtered at least a dozen antiexpulsion protesters in the Camilla Massacre, and forced Republican governor Rufus Bullock to ask for military intervention. One-quarter of the Original 33 would be killed by white supremacist violence, and Governor Bullock would be "obliged" by the Klan to resign the governorship and flee the state in 1871.

In Eutaw, Alabama, Black voters so outnumbered their white counterparts that in the 1868 presidential election, Republican Ulysses S. Grant easily won Greene County by more than two thousand votes.

But on October 25, 1870, two weeks before the gubernatorial election, white radicals opened fire on thousands of Black citizens at a political rally. Because of the Eutaw Massacre, Black voters were bullied into staying home on election day, allowing Robert Lindsay, the Democratic candidate for governor, to win the county by forty-three votes.

In Laurens, South Carolina, "ten or twelve persons" were slaughtered the day after the 1870 state elections. A congressional committee investigating Klan violence heard accounts of white and Black ballot-casters being "waited upon" after voting, which sounds biblically scary. Being attacked by dingy-robed horseback riders is one thing, but being "waited upon" sounds like Stephen King–novelesque, next-level racism.

In an attempt to vanquish the Klan's reign of fear, Congress passed a series of three increasingly restrictive laws aimed at curbing the terror groups' power. The Enforcement Act of 1870 prohibited groups from banding together, using force, or even wearing disguises to violate the constitutional rights of other citizens—namely the right to vote.

It did not work.

The Second Enforcement Act was similar but imposed harsher fines and allowed federal oversight of local and federal elections. It was cute but, of course, it didn't work, either. It wasn't necessarily the *elections* that concerned Black voters, it was the fireworks at the Klan afterparties that caused so much consternation. It's almost like Congress didn't hear that whole "waited upon" part. Still, they gave it one more try.

The Third Enforcement Act gave the president the right to suspend habeas corpus, an extraordinarily controversial power to hand to the commander in chief. Outside wartime, the United Sates has never invoked the authority to suspend this constitutionally guaranteed right, but Congress thought it was the only way to win this rapidly escalating race war. They didn't even try to pretend why they passed the legislation by calling it something like the "Patriot Act" or the "Please Be Nice to Black People Law of 1870."

They called it the Ku Klux Klan Act.

It did not work.

In 1871 the Klan continued its Klannish ways by slaughtering

thirty people in Meridian, Mississippi. No one knows how many people a white militia mob murdered on Easter Sunday in Colfax, Louisiana, in 1873. A military report lists eighty-one Black men; another fifteen to twenty bodies were fished out of the Red River, and another eighteen were secretly buried, according to historian Charles Lane. In August 1874, the White League killed at least a dozen freedmen in Couschatta, Louisiana. One month after the Couschatta Massacre, five thousand members of the Crescent City White League successfully overthrew the state government and installed the Democrat John McEnery as governor. Although their victory was quickly erased by federal troops, the White League later erected a monument to their cause, containing the following inscription:

> McEnery and Penn having been elected governor and lieutenant-governor by the white people, were duly installed by this overthrow of carpetbag government, ousting the usurpers, Governor Kellogg (white) and Lieutenant-Governor Antoine (colored).
>
> United States troops took over the state government and reinstated the usurpers but the national election of November 1876 recognized white supremacy in the South and gave us our state.

By now, you may be wondering, where is our hero?

Well, perhaps the most inconceivable thing about this story is neither the details of the horrific massacres nor the fact that—for the most part—Black people haven't even succumbed to the primal seduction of vengeance. (Remember, the ones who were "waited upon" outnumbered the waiters.) *There were more of us* than them, yet we did not reciprocate the terror. Still, that is not the magnificent part.

The most marvelous, unbelievable thing about Black people in America is that they exist. Every imaginable monstrosity that evil can conjure has been inflicted on this population, yet they have not been extinguished.

The hero remains.

Still.

And that is the most wondrous part of all.

1874–1879

ATLANTA

TERA W. HUNTER

IN LATE 1879, ERNEST INGERSOLL, A MICHIGAN-BORN NATuralist and explorer, visited Atlanta. He was writing an article for *Harper's Magazine* trumpeting the rise of the New South city since the Civil War.

Ingersoll was most impressed by the railroad industry, the ancillary businesses it stimulated, and the cushy lifestyles of the emergent industrial elites who profited from the city's explosion. But he did not ignore the sights and sounds of the downtrodden elements, which struck contrasting poses alongside the prosperity.

"A feature of the city to which no well-ordered resident will be likely to direct a stranger's attention is Shermantown," he wrote. The place was so named because during the Civil War it had been occupied by U.S. general William T. Sherman, when he carried out his famous raid against the Confederates heading to the coast. Shermantown is a "random collection of huts forming a dense negro settlement in the heart of an otherwise attractive portion of the place," Ingersoll noted. "The women 'take in washing' and the males as far as our observation taught us, devote their time to the lordly occupation of sunning themselves."

An ink drawing of Shermantown accompanied the article, which complements Ingersoll's commentary overly determined by his admittedly tutored "observations," but it also offers readers additional information that insiders of Black urban life in the late 1870s might have seen differently. Ingersoll inferred disorder where one could have

seen a consciously arranged village, poverty aside. Houses were drawn as dilapidated dwellings and looked fragile as though they were temporary shelter, built out of found wood and scraps of material.

Housing in the city was scarce as the population exploded after the Civil War and recovery from the war's destruction was slow, which meant makeshift units were the norm for the influx of poor residents. The shacks, arranged in a semicircle, appear to have been built close enough together that little space passed between them. Some have rickety stairs leading up to doorways pitched off the ground, which allowed individuals to perch themselves and look out into the communal space in the center. Chickens and pigs wander about the yards, signs that rural people brought their survival skills with them to the city. The houses surround a well and a canopy that covers the implements of the washing trade, such as buckets and scrub boards. Women are shown walking with a basket of dirty laundry and doing the wash.

Men are shown, by contrast, hanging out but not engaged in work. Though Ingersoll noted Black men's presence in other parts of the city, however insidious he found their occupations, as "brush fiends," chair vendors, street musicians, and blackface minstrels, he leaned on the stereotypes of lazy Black men "sunning themselves" in Shermantown. Progress in the form of physical construction of the city in Ingersoll's mind popped up like magic, without the human ingenuity of (Black and white) manual labor behind it. He did not connect the dots between Atlanta's fast growth and economic development and the contributions of Black men as draymen, painters, brick masons, carpenters, brakemen, and factory workers.

Jim Crow had not yet settled in rigidly in 1879, which meant Blacks and whites lived in proximity in the still relatively new postwar city. But the signs of racial and economic inequalities were already being written into the physical landscape. Shermantown, just east of downtown, was the site of one of the largest Black settlements, though it otherwise mirrored the rest of the city's demographics. Black residents were located in all the city's wards. They dominated none of them but made up sizable clusters in several areas. They lived in low-lying areas where water and sewer systems were exclusively enjoyed by downtown businesses and wealthy white residents. Light sketches

of houses perched on a hill at the top of the drawing depict the typical arrangement of good housing lording over poor stock in the bottoms.

Black clusters were subject not only to floods but also to sewage literally draining down from the hills. City laws allowed garbage to be dumped in Black and poor neighborhoods, in addition to the natural flow of malodorous human waste of the better-offs. Potable water for drinking and bathing could only be siphoned from wells. Ingersoll seemed not to notice these health hazards of uneven development, claiming that "drainage is therefore excellent" and "epidemics are unheard of and the locality is an island of health in the treacherous yellow-fever climate of its region."

There is much beneath the surface that Ingersoll, in pigeonholing Blackness, could not see. Shermantown was a vibrant settlement. It was the home of Big Bethel A.M.E. Church, the first Black church in the city, dating back to the antebellum era. The church in turn housed the first school for freed people in 1865, organized by James Tate, a grocer and former slave, then taken over by the American Missionary Association a year later and named the Storrs School. Wheat Street Baptist Church and the First Congregational Church were also located there. Wheat Street itself was a major street that housed an inchoate Black business district that would later become famous as Auburn Avenue, still thriving today. And it was home to the growing popularity of commercial leisure, especially outlets for music and dance.

Shermantown, like the other Black neighborhoods, was a haven for newly freed people in search of life in the city that would enhance their autonomy and allow them to escape the strictures of bondage. At the center of this effort to create community were women, the majority of the city's Black population. And essential to their existence was work. They were half of the Black workforce.

These women did impress Ingersoll, if nothing else, because of their ubiquity: "There are certain features that strike the stranger's eye. On Mondays you may see tall, straight negro girls marching through the streets carrying enormous bundles of soiled clothes upon their heads," he wrote. Domestic work was the primary occupation of Black women, and within that, laundry work dominated. By the time

Ingersoll was visiting the city, laundry work was growing by leaps and bounds. There were more washerwomen than there were casual laborers among men (the largest single category of men's work). Over the course of the 1870s, the number of Black washerwomen increased by 150 percent.

A number of factors fed this expansion. Black women were forced into domestic service, but they gravitated to the jobs that gave them the most autonomy. Whereas under slavery, domestics lived and worked under the close supervision of slaveholders, under freedom, Black women were determined to live on their own. They refused to live in the homes of employers even when they chose to be general housekeepers and cooks. But taking in wash gave them the most flexibility. It changed the dynamic of the conventional employer-employee relationship by giving the washerwomen more control over their labor. Women picked up loads of dirty clothes and brought them back to their homes, just as the lithograph depicted. Married women and those with children especially found the flexibility of the work attractive, as it allowed them to take care of their children and perform other chores intermittently.

The popularity of washerwomen was also driven by demand. As more whites moved into the city, they desired a variety of housekeeping services. Laundry work was among the most arduous household chores for women, and any who could afford to do so preferred to send out their wash for others to literally do their dirty work. Even some poor whites, only slightly better off, took advantage of Black women's labor.

The community life that was invisible to Ingersoll's sightseeing enabled more than women's work. Just two years before, the washerwomen had started to mobilize, deciding to adopt a uniform rate of pay for their labor. And in 1879 they gathered to form the first organization, a protective association, modeled on the prolific mutual aid societies founded by African Americans in the postwar South. Two years later this would all build up to the launch of the largest strike in the city's history.

The broader context of these working-class mobilizations was a thriving grassroots political culture that persisted beyond the formal

end of Reconstruction. Neighborhoods like Shermantown were bases for community organizing. Mass meetings were held in churches and halls where men, women, and children gathered to deliberate on the important issues of the day: to demand the hiring of Black teachers and police officers, jobs on the state railroads, more public schools, and the provision of potable water and sewer lines.

These political mobilizations were intensifying when Ingersoll visited. African American men came close to winning city council elections, defeated only by the last-minute scramble by white voters who shrank the field of candidates and closed ranks. Only men could legally vote, but women eagerly engaged in local Republican politics, much to the chagrin of employers who complained about their absenteeism as a result of their partisan work.

Shermantown of 1879 was by no means unique. The limitations of racial and economic oppression and the collective efforts to push against them were common in Black communities throughout the South and the nation. Truth be told, similar disparities persist today. Despite progress since the civil rights era, African Americans are disproportionately confined to inferior, overpriced housing, live near hazardous waste sites, and even lack clean drinking water in places like Flint, Michigan, Ingersoll's home state. And yet, out of the shabbiest of conditions, miracles have been made.

Dreams have been deferred but not always defeated.

1879–1884

JOHN WAYNE NILES

WILLIAM A. DARITY, JR.

IN THE EARLY 1880S, JOHN WAYNE NILES PROPOSED A TERritorial reparations program under the aegis of his all-Black Indemnity Party. It arrived during the period between the unmet promise of the Black demand for slavery restitution in the form of forty-acre land grants and Callie House's 1890s movement claiming pensions for the formerly enslaved. While Callie House's National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association reached a membership numbering in the hundreds of thousands, Niles's Indemnity Party probably never exceeded two thousand members. But the notoriety of his efforts extended much further than the scale of his political party. His personal notoriety as a swindler stretched nationwide. His numerous exploits were covered in newspapers from New York to San Francisco.

In 1883 he brought a petition to the U.S. Congress seeking an allocation of separate public lands for settlement of the "colored folk" living in the South. In 1884 he mysteriously vanished from the national eye and historical record. It is unclear what happened to him after 1883, and precisely when or how he died.

John Wayne Niles was born in 1842, the son of a white man and a Black woman in Mississippi. In adulthood, white reporters described him variously as "a burly and muscular negro, weighing over two hundred pounds, light in color, with features rather Caucasian than Senegambian, and with a winning and self-confident rather than an

intelligent expression," as "[a] heavily built colored man," and as "the most remarkable negro in the Southwest."

Niles may have been semiliterate, but evidently he was a remarkable orator with uncanny powers of persuasion. Not only did he have a convincing impact on "the more illiterate of his own race," but he included well-heeled white bankers among the victims of his artistry as a con man.

In 1869, in Tennessee, he had been incarcerated for killing a man, but somehow obtained a pardon from the governor long before his sentence was complete. Upon release from prison, Niles moved to Kentucky and became engaged with the Exodusters movement, the effort to form settlements in Kansas on the part of Black immigrants to the state. He joined the Nicodemus, Kansas, colony project in a leadership capacity and arrived at the settlement site in 1877. Apparently he left a wife and children behind in Kentucky, and there is no evidence that he was with them again after his migration to Kansas.

His presence in Nicodemus leaves a contradictory trail. While most of the Black settlers applauded Niles for the community's survival in mid-1878 in the midst of food shortages and viewed him with admiration, he also developed a reputation as a nineteenth-century hustler, a scoundrel always on the make.

In 1881, during his time in Nicodemus, he managed to obtain a substantial loan from banker Jay J. Smith, by offering as collateral fifteen hundred bushels of corn he said he had bought from local Blacks at twenty cents a bushel. Niles convinced Smith not only that he had this large amount of corn in his possession but also that he anticipated he could resell it at thirty cents a bushel—and required a loan to tide him over until the price of corn reached a suitable level.

When Smith learned that local Black farmers had not raised an amount of corn that even approached the quantity that Niles claimed to have, he brought Niles to trial on charges of fraud. Drawing upon his oratorical prowess, Niles successfully defended himself against a team of professional lawyers hired by the banker without calling a single witness. In a stem-winding, three-hour statement, described by one observer as both "eloquent and soulful," Niles drew the attention

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of the all-white jury not only to the plight of the Black man in the near aftermath of slavery but to their own experience of oppressive encounters with local banks. Niles won his case. "The judge who criticized the 'jurymen for ignoring the evidence and their instructions,' the county attorney, the assisting lawyers, and the bankers were all astonished at the verdict," according to a report.

Even W. H. Smith, president of the Nicodemus colony, saw Niles's efforts to obtain support and resources for the settlement as unauthorized, dishonest, and self-serving. Always seeming to try to outrun any deterioration in his reputation, Niles left Nicodemus shortly after his exoneration in the "corn trial" and moved to Phillips County, Arkansas.

Niles's idea of a land reparations program for all Blacks seems to have taken seed in Nicodemus. However, it came to fruition in Arkansas, where Niles formed the Indemnity Party, an all-Black political party seeking reparations and providing an alternative to the Republican Party for Black voters in the state. The charge immediately was made that any diversion of the Black vote from the Republican Party would give the more explicitly white supremacist Democratic Party a greater opportunity for electoral success. This parallels the contemporary claim—given the post-Dixiecrat reversal of the postures of the two major parties—that any withdrawal of Black votes from the Democratic Party in search of a specific "Black agenda" only will give the now overtly racist Republican Party an additional critical leg up in national politics.

Not only were local whites discontented about Niles's political activity, they also were disturbed by his alleged involvement in additional scams. But it was the formation and promotion of the Indemnity Party that seemed to draw the greatest ire.

Many people schemed to bring Niles down because of his political activities. In 1882 Niles owned a store in Lee County, Arkansas, where he sold whiskey without a license. Initially he was arrested and convicted on multiple charges of violating state law and ordered to pay $1,200 in fines. But the Black community rose in his support, and after he spent a few days in jail, it raised the full amount and paid off his fine. However, he was rearrested immediately for violating federal

laws by selling liquor without a license. This time, despite a renewed outcry from the Black community, he was convicted again and ordered to pay $400 and spend four months in state prison.

At the end of his sentence, Niles left Arkansas for Washington, D.C., and proceeded to actively promote the Indemnity Party's project. Niles sought to obtain public land where Blacks could live separately and independently of whites. It would constitute a space for Black settlement of six thousand square miles or almost 4 million acres.

Niles advanced this proposal in the latter half of 1883, and by early October he was making the case in writing to the president and the Department of Justice. He also indicated that an all-Black political party could come together and possibly nominate Frederick Douglass as its presidential candidate. Niles argued that it was necessary to "declare war against the Republican Party" for its failure to fulfill its promises for two decades.

The climate for the Indemnity Party's plan was not propitious. Respectable voices in the Black community were hostile. On October 15, 1883, the Supreme Court struck down the Civil Rights Act of 1875, an act that had prohibited discrimination in access to hotels, trains, and other public sites. On November 3, 1883, the Danville (Virginia) Massacre resulted in massive loss of Black lives and destruction of Black property. The massacre was followed by the November 6, 1883, election, when Virginia senator William Mahone and the Readjuster Party lost control of the state to the Democratic Party.

Ultimately, it was America's officialdom who shut down Niles's project. Attorney General Benjamin Harris Brewster deflected the Indemnity Party's petition in two steps. First, he invoked a states' rights argument that the territory sought was under the jurisdiction of the state of Arkansas and beyond the approval of the federal government for Black settlement. Second, Brewster said if satisfaction was not forthcoming from the state of Arkansas, Niles ultimately could appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court—the same Court that just had struck down the Civil Rights Act of 1875.

With Kansas senator John James Ingalls's successful motion to table the Indemnity Party's petition for homesteads for Black Amer-

icans on the floor of Congress, this chapter of the Black reparations movement came to an end. Subsequent claims for reparations consistently have been met by resistance from elite Blacks and by concerted efforts to discredit advocates. Unfortunately, Niles's personal history had given his opponents plenty of ammunition, but implementation of his core idea—provision of land grants for the formerly enslaved—would have forever altered the trajectory of America's racial and economic history.

1884–1889

PHILADELPHIA

KALI NICOLE GROSS

WHEN CHRISTOPHER J. PERRY LAUNCHED THE *PHILADELPHIA Tribune* on November 28, 1884, he had no way of knowing that it would become the longest-running independent Black newspaper in the nation. Yet he was confident in the future success of the *Tribune* because it was unabashedly written by Black people for Black people. Or as Perry described it, the *Tribune*'s purpose was to "lead the masses to appreciate their best interests and to suggest the best means for attaining deserved ends." The clear imperative and sense of urgency are evident in his words. With good reason, too.

Between 1870 and 1890, Philadelphia's African American community nearly doubled in size. This steady stream of Black migrants sparked white fears of rising urban crime. Police officers profiled African Americans using surveillance methods that a decade later would be codified into official policing practices. Patrolmen were directed to report on and detain all those who appeared to be poor or loiterers from outside the state. Such tactics found Black people especially vulnerable in a city that already had a long history of disproportionately incarcerating them. Philadelphia was home to the country's first penitentiary, the Walnut Street Jail, founded in 1790, in anticipation of Black freedom after Pennsylvania passed one of the earliest acts of gradual abolition in 1780.

Building on a legacy of biased justice, police officers in Perry's time employed a muscular surveillance of suspected members of the "crime class." Between 1884 and 1887, the force had a clarified admin-

istrative hierarchy and a detective squad overseen by a former Secret Service operative. Coercion in custody was routine, as police beating prisoners was, for the most part, tolerated as a part of the job. Most African Americans arrested by Philadelphia police and sentenced by its justice system were charged with crimes against property. But in 1885, one recent Black migrant to the city would be arrested for murder.

The majority of the migrants hailed from Virginia and Maryland, but smaller numbers of African Americans came from New England. Such was the case with Annie E. Cutler, a twenty-one-year-old Black woman who lived and worked in the heart of the City of Brotherly Love. Laboring as a cook, Annie had a solid job at a saloon at 835 Race Street. Perhaps because of her schooling and pedigree (she had had eight years of private education in her hometown of Newport, Rhode Island), Annie enjoyed an amicable relationship with her white employers, the Mettlers. She also maintained a close, intimate relationship with the man she expected to wed, William H. Knight. The two had been dating for years. She had followed him from Newport to Philadelphia, after falling in love with him in the summer of 1882.

Despite the perils of anti-Blackness, the city held exciting activities for young couples. There were "jook joints" and pubs, theaters, concerts, dances, and parks for leisurely strolls. It also offered a measure of anonymity that permitted brazen, even reckless kinds of social and sexual attachments. Lovers' quarrels were fairly common, and shouting matches could easily devolve into more violent melees, particularly in underground haunts where liquor and carousing mixed in combustible ways.

Yet the violence that erupted between Annie and William did not occur while they were in the throes of a heated argument in a hot, packed dance hall; nor did it burst forth in a private space where the two might have cuddled up from time to time. It happened a few steps away from 1025 Arch Street, where William worked as a waiter, on a crisp spring evening in late April, in front of several witnesses.

William had been heading home when he passed and ignored Annie on the sidewalk. He had recently broken her heart by ending

their engagement with the news he had married another woman. His new wife was expecting their first child. William's failure to acknowledge Annie served as the final straw. In a statement read before the court, Annie said: "He did not look at me, and passed without appearing to see me. . . . This enraged me more than ever. Without knowing what I was doing I took a pistol and shot him." Not just once, either. William was struck twice and died from his injuries. Shocked witnesses disarmed Annie and detained her for the authorities. According to their accounts, she wanted to know if William was dead and begged them to let her "give him the balance of it." An officer came and arrested her. She was charged with murder.

Attorney Elijah J. Fox initially handled her case. Though it seemed open and shut, details about her motives emerged. Annie had shared her wages with William for years in anticipation of their marriage. She had also shared her body. She charged that William had "ruined" her and then married another. Prior to the night of the shooting, Annie had written two letters—both were entered into evidence. One was to the Mettlers, apologizing and thanking them for their kindness. The second was to her mother, apologizing for what she was about to do. Reading like a suicide note, the letter contained her request to be buried in a plain white box.

Under the circumstances, Fox advised Annie to plead guilty, likely to elicit mercy from the court. Whatever Fox's logic, it was the wrong move. The judge found Annie guilty of murder in the first degree. She burst into tears upon hearing the verdict. Fox asked that the sentence be postponed. It was. In the weeks that followed, Annie's family, employers, and a growing number of concerned citizens worked to secure a pardon.

On October 16, 1885, Thomas E. White, Esq., presented Annie's statement to the court. She said that shortly before their fatal encounter, William had beaten her during an argument, and that she had been driven to alcohol and despair. She said she purchased the gun as protection because she feared that he might strike her again when she confronted him. Judge Mitchell was unconvinced, particularly because the two letters indicated premeditation and because Annie had tested the gun ahead of the meeting to make certain it

worked. "The sentence of the law is that you, Annie E. Cutler," the judge said, "be taken hence to whence you came, and there hanged by the neck until you are dead. And may God have mercy upon your soul."

Undoubtedly, they were terrifying words for any prisoner to hear, but considering many Philadelphians' long-standing aversion to capital punishment, Annie had a strong chance of having her sentence commuted. After the hearing, her attorney, her family, her supporters—a bevy of elite Blacks and whites among them—and the Pennsylvania Prison Society swung into action to press the board of pardons.

The specter of a double standard in the case was troubling. White women received the benefit of the doubt from the justice system and in similar cases were afforded mercy as fallen women. Wealthy Black men like Robert Purvis, who had famously financed abolitionist causes and William Garrison Lloyd's paper *The Liberator*, and elite Black and white men such as William Still, John Wanamaker, and J. C. Strawbridge, all advocated for mercy and signed petitions asking that Annie's sentence be commuted. Even the Citizens' Suffrage Association took up Annie's cause. Not everyone agreed. Edward M. Davis tendered his resignation from the group, citing its engagement in matters that were not "directly connected with the cause of attaining woman's equality at the ballot." His resignation was accepted.

Annie's support grew, and her counsel submitted a request for commutation, asking not for life imprisonment but for a fair sentence given the aggravating circumstances, including that Annie had been poorly advised by her first attorney. Their efforts were rewarded. Annie's sentence was commuted to eight years at Eastern State Penitentiary. Incarcerated Blacks had disproportionately higher rates of death at Eastern, but compared to a hangman's scaffold, the new sentence seemed like a win.

Annie's crime, sentence, and commutation played out in detail in local presses, with the *Tribune* likely among them. Unfortunately, the earliest archived issues of the *Tribune* begin in 1912. The case stirred people and mobilized collective, interracial action against the state-

sanctioned killing of a Black woman. Even against the era's rising racist tides, women and men in Philadelphia organized against the judicial double standards because they knew not just that tolerating them would amount to an unfair outcome for Annie Cutler but that such an imbalance ultimately held dangers for all.

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1889–1894

LYNCHING

CRYSTAL N. FEIMSTER

I found that in order to justify these horrible atrocities [lynchings] to the world, the Negro was being branded as a race of rapists, who were especially mad after white women. I found that white men who had created a race of mulattos by raping and consorting with Negro women were still doing so wherever they could, these same white men lynched, burned, and tortured Negro men for doing the same thing with white women, even when the white women were willing victims.

IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT

In his widely accepted 1889 study, *The Plantation Negro as Freeman,* Southern historian Philip Alexander Bruce alleged a dangerous moral regression among post-emancipation African Americans. Black people, Bruce maintained, had undergone a salutary civilizing process through enslavement that was tragically ended by emancipation.

For Bruce, the most striking example was the alleged "increase" of "that most frightful crime," the rape of white women by Black men. Adding insult to injury, Bruce blamed the supposedly hypersexual Black women. Black men are "so accustomed to the wantonness of the women of his own race" that they are "unable to gauge the terrible character of this offense against the integrity of virtuous womanhood."

Bruce's construction of the Black male rapist functioned to reinforce a variety of racist ideas in the South: that only white women were chaste and respectable; that Black womanhood was immoral and unredeemable; and that white men were honorable and civilized. The spread of such ideas in the early 1890s justified an unprecedented period of lynching.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the mother of the nineteenth-century antilynching movement, was among the first to publicly challenge the racist ideas about Black men and women that Southern whites deployed to excuse their mob violence. Wells-Barnett, born into slavery during the Civil War, lost her parents to yellow fever at sixteen. She was a teacher-turned-journalist who co-owned the *Memphis Free Speech.* She launched her antilynching crusade in 1892, after a white mob of economic competitors murdered three prospering Black Memphis store owners, one of whom was a close friend.

She urged African Americans to fight back, with guns if necessary and through economic pressure. Spurred by her scathing editorials, thousands migrated to Oklahoma, while those who stayed in Memphis boycotted the newly opened streetcar line. Wells-Barnett began investigating other lynchings and soon discovered that many were designed to suppress the economic and political rights of Black people. When she published an editorial arguing that "nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women," a white mob destroyed her press. Wells-Barnett, in New York at the time, received warnings not to return to Memphis at the cost of her life.

Far from being silenced by this attack, Wells-Barnett transformed herself into the architect of an international crusade. In exile from Memphis, she wrote for the *New York Age* and in 1892 published her first antilynching pamphlet, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases,* which offered an incisive analysis of the economic roots of lynching and linked violence against Black men with the sexual exploitation of Black women by white men. Wells-Barnett revealed that less than 30 percent of all lynchings involved the charge of rape, let alone the conviction. She also documented consensual sexual contact between Black men and white women and insisted that lynching

functioned to keep Black folks terrorized, politically disenfranchised, and economically dependent.

From the inception of her crusade, Wells-Barnett claimed that white hysteria about the rape of white women by Black men effectively masked violence against women—both Black and white. "To justify their own barbarism," she argued, Southern white men "assume a chivalry which they do not possess." Lynching, she explained, was not about protecting Southern womanhood but had everything to do with shoring up white men's social, economic, and political power—in other words, white male supremacy. Desperate to control white women's sexual behavior and maintain sexual control over Black women, Southern white men had created a scapegoat in the animalized figure of the Black rapist. Wells-Barnett argued that the focus and attention on the image of the Black rapist concealed lynching's motives and masked violence against Black women who were victims of sexual assault and lynching.

While Wells-Barnett advocated Black self-defense and self-help, she also hoped to turn white public opinion against the South, where most lynchings took place. In 1893 and again in 1894, she traveled to England, where she inspired the formation of the British Anti-Lynching Society and published *The Red Record* in 1895. By the end of her second British tour, Wells-Barnett had made lynching a cause célèbre among British reformers. White American men found that in the eyes of the "civilized" world, their tolerance of racial violence had cast them in the unsightly position of unmanly savages. Her skillful manipulation of dominant cultural themes did not stop lynching, but it did put mob violence on the American reform agenda and made visible sexual assault against Black women.

Highlighting Black women's victimization and white men's disregard for law and order, Wells-Barnett challenged the racial double standard embedded in the rape-lynch discourse. In *The Red Record,* under the heading "Suspected, Innocent and Lynched," Wells-Barnett reported the 1893 lynching of Benjamin Jackson; his wife, Mahala Jackson; his mother-in-law, Lou Carter; and Rufus Bigley in Quincy, Mississippi. She explained that the two women, accused of well poisoning, were hung by a white mob even after they were found innocent of the charges against them. Wells-Barnett argued that neither their innocence nor their sex served to "protect the women from the demands of the Christian white people of that section of the country. In any other land and with any other people, the fact that [these two accused persons] were women would have pleaded in their favor for protection and fair play." Wells-Barnett argued that mob violence against Black women was not only barbaric but ran counter to the rape-lynch discourse. The accusation of rape, she argued, could not explain why Black women were "put to death with unspeakable savagery."

Wells-Barnett constructed an antilynching argument that addressed the inconsistencies produced not only by female victims of lynching but also by Black female victims of white men's sexual assault. In *The Red Record,* under the heading "Color Line Justice," Wells-Barnett provided numerous examples of Black women and girls raped by white men. She opened the section with this report: "In Baltimore, Maryland, a gang of white ruffians assaulted a respectable colored girl who was out walking with a young man of her own race. They held her escort and outraged the girl. It was a deed dastardly enough to arouse Southern blood, which gives its horror of rape as excuse for lawlessness, but she was a colored woman. The case went to the courts, and they were acquitted." Black women, she argued, were protected neither by mob violence nor by the courts.

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1894–1899

PLESSY V. FERGUSON

BLAIR L. M. KELLEY

AT THE BEGINNING OF OUR CONVERSATION, KEITH PLESSY lets me know that if I google Homer Plessy, historic images of mixed-race men pop up, but none of the images are actually of him. He tells me that the man with the full beard is P.B.S. Pinchback, a Union Army officer and the former lieutenant governor of Louisiana. The clean-shaven gentleman, who is also not Plessy, is Daniel Desdunes, the son of organizer Rodolphe Desdunes and the first man selected by the Citizens' Committee to test the legality of interstate segregation. This isn't the first time Keith Plessy, whose fourth-great-grandfather was also Homer Plessy's grandfather, has told me a search of the Internet will not turn up a real picture of Homer Plessy.

He mentioned this when we first met eight years ago, not realizing he kept repeating the same complaint. His repetition underscores his abiding frustration with the error of misidentification and the other omissions that shape our landscapes. Keith Plessy wants to correct those mistakes and reshape how we understand the legacy of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896).

Those familiar with the outlines of the legal battle for civil rights know that the U.S. Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* served as the legal foundation for de jure racial segregation. This failed test case was put forward by the small group of Creole of Color New Orleans activists called the Citizens' Committee. The case set the precedent of "separate but equal" that stood for more than half a century. Indeed, when viewed strictly as a story about legal history, *Plessy* is the top of

a slippery slope down to an American South where Jim Crow segregation marked every landscape. However, my conversations with Keith Plessy remind me that this historic case must be considered in the context of the particularities of place and time—then and now. *Plessy v. Ferguson* was the manifestation of the African American opposition to segregationist attempts to shame and degrade Black train passengers. While elite Creole of Color leaders organized the Citizens' Committee, African Americans from all walks of life supported the effort—more than 110 organizations and thirty individuals donated to the cause. Likewise, in this moment, when our collective memories about the past are hotly contested, it will be the work of like-minded people who will harness accurate histories of the past to better address our present.

I suspect that there is no extant picture of Homer Plessy because he was working-class and probably did not have his picture taken often if at all. In the 1890s, a portrait was a luxury. Black scholars and race leaders, not shoemakers, had portraits. Even if there was once a picture, in a city that suffers from floods, winds, and weather, so much family history has been lost. In addition to the visual silence, there is an archival one; none of the extant correspondence between the members of the Citizens' Committee and their attorney, Albion Tourgée, includes any personal, political, or professional reference to Plessy. In the elder Desdunes's 1911 book *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire* (Our People and Our History), a history of the Creole of Color community in New Orleans, the only mention of Plessy reports that "the Committee engaged Mr. Homere [*sic*] Plessy as its representative."

Like his well-known forebear, Keith Plessy is a working-class activist and a New Orleans native. He has worked as a bellman at the New Orleans Marriot on Canal Street for nearly as long as the centrally located modern hotel has existed. Along with filmmaker Phoebe Ferguson, a descendant of Judge John Howard Ferguson, the local judge whose decision against Homer Plessy connected his name to the case forever, Keith established the Plessy and Ferguson Foundation in 2004. They are working to increase public understanding of this historic case. To date, their organization has erected five historical markers in the city and state, worked to have June 7 declared

Homer A. Plessy Day, and led the charge for New Orleans to have the street where Homer Plessy boarded the East Louisiana railcar designated Homer Plessy Way.

Well before the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, New Orleans was home to one of the largest communities of *gens de couleur libre*, or free people of color, in the South, where people of mixed European, Native American, and African descent battled to establish themselves as free in a slave society. Some were manumitted, educated, and propertied by their European fathers, while others had migrated to the port city from Haiti and Cuba. Plessy's paternal grandfather, Germain Plessy, was a white Frenchman who fled to New Orleans in the wake of the Haitian Revolution and had a family with a free woman of color. But when Keith Plessy told me his family history, he began with his great-grandmother, Agnes Mathieu, who successfully sued for her freedom in the courts after a slaveholder refused to honor his promise to allow her to purchase her freedom. He connected her determined advocacy with Homer Plessy's and, implicitly, with his own.

Working-class Creoles of Color like Plessy were set apart from both the elite Creoles of Color—the New Orleans equivalents of the "talented tenth"—and the masses of Black workers whose ancestors had been in bondage. Plessy was a shoemaker. Keith Plessy said he was "raised to the trade" that his stepfather, Victor Dupart, passed down. But Dupart passed down a legacy of activism as well; he had been active in the 1873 Unification movement, a short-lived but valiant effort to halt political, social, and economic discrimination. Dupart was one of the published signatories of the movement's *Appeal for the Unification of the People of Louisiana.*

At the time of the arrest in 1892, Plessy lived with his wife in a rented house on North Claiborne Avenue, a beautiful tree-lined thoroughfare in the Faubourg Tremé, an integrated working-class neighborhood on the French side of Canal Street. He served as the vice president of a local education reform organization, the Justice, Protective, Educational and Social Club, that resisted racism in New Orleans schools. Perhaps Plessy saw the work of the Citizens' Committee as an extension of his own interest in fighting segregation. The committee held mass meetings in Congregation Hall, just steps from

Plessy's home. We can't know exactly what connected him to the effort. Maybe he was drawn by a flyer to attend a meeting of the Citizens' Committee. Perhaps because of his racial ambiguity, relative youth, and interest in activism, he was asked to volunteer on the Citizens' Committee. These ambiguities remind us why Keith Plessy is digging. So much of this past is long gone.

When I googled Homer Plessy's 1892 home address, 1108 North Claiborne Avenue, I saw nothing but concrete. The shotgun house where Plessy lived with his young wife is long gone, razed in 1968 to construct Highway 10. There is no remnant of his life on a tree-lined street so wide that children played ball on the grassy neutral ground in the middle. You'll see no hint as to why that avenue was the site of Black Mardi Gras, where the Zulus and Mardi Gras Indians would parade annually. As in so much of the country, the historic landscape of the lives of Tremé's everyday Black working men and women is gone, wiped away by politicians seeking urban renewal and labeling Black property as blighted. Homer Plessy put his life on the line to fight to preserve his citizenship, yet policy makers and planners saw the landscape of his New Orleans as disposable. The work of preservation that Keith Plessy is doing is urgent. The landscapes of African American history are as vulnerable to gentrification today as they were decades ago to eminent domain and urban renewal. But this work has a hold on him, perhaps because Homer Plessy is still with us. As Keith Plessy said, when "you start looking for your ancestors, you find out they have been looking for you all along."

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1899–1904

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

DERRICK ALRIDGE

THROUGHOUT MY YEARS OF TEACHING COURSES IN AFRICAN American educational history and studies, I have always been excited to discuss Booker T. Washington. My excitement stems from engaging the complexity of the man and scrutinizing the ways he is presented in scholarly works and contemporary textbooks. Washington is often referred to as the "Wizard of Tuskegee." His politics, which are described as "accommodationist," are typically referred to as the "Tuskegee Machine."

Typically, in my classes, some students support Washington's pragmatic approach and his advocacy for Black people. They admire his focus on education as a means of making a living, while forgoing civil rights for the time being. Other students view Washington's approach as representing acquiescence to white supremacy. I often agree with aspects of both viewpoints, and I try to help my students understand this complex man in the context of his time.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States perceived that it had a problem, in the form of 9 million Black Americans who sought the rights of full citizenship. The so-called "Negro problem," sometimes referred to as the "Negro question," was of such great concern that politicians and scholars alike examined the "problem" and proposed measures to address it. Some believed that with proper training and the passage of time, Black people could evolve intellectually to become productive members of American society. Others viewed Black people as inherently inferior and incapable of full inte-

gration into society. Among African Americans, Booker Taliaferro Washington emerged as a representative of his race who offered a pragmatic approach to addressing the "Negro problem." He was so revered as a great "Negro" leader of his time that historian August Meier has called the period between 1880 and 1915 the "age of Booker T. Washington."

Washington emerged on the national scene on September 18, 1895, at the Cotton States International Exposition in Atlanta. His speech, commonly known as the "Atlanta Compromise," offered pragmatic suggestions for resolving the "Negro problem." Washington observed that after Emancipation, Black Americans had started "at the top instead of at the bottom," emphasizing political participation and holding seats in Congress during Reconstruction. Washington argued that instead of engaging in politics and pursuing civil rights, Black people should have pursued training in the trades and agriculture to obtain the skills to make a living.

In making his point, Washington offered the analogy of a ship lost at sea for many days hailing another ship for help, indicating that its crew was dying of thirst. Washington related how each time the crew of the lost ship called for water, the crew of the other ship replied, "Cast down your bucket where you are." The crew of the lost ship finally cast down their buckets and retrieved fresh water from the Amazon River, enabling the crew to survive.

For Washington's audience, the lost ship represented Black America. Washington encouraged African Americans to heed the advice given to the crew of the ship: "'Cast down your bucket where you are.' Cast it down, making friends in every manly way of the people of all races, by whom you are surrounded." He encouraged them to cast down their bucket in "agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions." Addressing whites' fears about the commingling of Black and white people, he noted, "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."

When I teach Washington, I always begin with his Atlanta Compromise speech. I have read and taught the speech and heard it recited countless times over the past few decades. I consistently struggle

with certain passages, particularly Washington's statement, "The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly." While much of his message sounds like appeasement of the white South, a closer reading reveals that these are the words of an extremely pragmatic and politically astute man dedicated to the future of his race. I therefore challenge my students and myself to "step into Washington's time." This means remembering that in 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* had established the "separate but equal" doctrine, upholding Jim Crow laws throughout the South. Moreover, 541 African Americans were lynched between 1899 and 1904. These realities offer crucial context for understanding Washington's views.

Though Washington published several books, I always assign his autobiography *Up from Slavery* as the central text in studying his life and thought. *Up from Slavery* reads like an inspiring Horatio Alger story, yet as Ishmael Reed notes, the story is even more impressive because Washington was born into slavery and founded a university. Published in 1901, the book recounts how Washington received no education as a slave but had vivid memories of seeing children sitting at desks in a schoolhouse. Going to school, he believed, "would be about the same as getting into paradise."

Washington's book recounts the valuable lessons he learned from his mother and stepfather, as well as from his own work in coal mines. He describes the lessons of tidiness and cleanliness he gleaned from Mrs. Ruffner, a woman for whom he once worked. He also tells of his odyssey traveling by foot, wagon, and car five hundred miles to the Hampton Institute; the mentorship he received from Union general Samuel Chapman Armstrong; and his founding of the Tuskegee Institute.

Each time I teach *Up from Slavery,* my students and I ponder how much of the book reflects Washington's true thoughts and feelings. We consider to what extent the work might reflect a mythology of himself and of Blacks as a people that he wanted to convey to the country at that particular moment in time. In the end, we typically conclude that, like most other biographies, the book reflects both the real Washington and a mythological Washington.

In addition to *Up from Slavery*, I have my students read Washington's collection of published papers, his correspondence, and passages from books about Washington. We discuss how he sometimes made jokes about Black Americans that appealed to white audiences; these jokes often chastised Black people for having an obsession with learning the classics before learning to make a living.

At the same time, it is clear that behind the scenes Washington advocated for Black civil rights. For example, he stated the following in the *Birmingham Age-Herald* in 1904:

> Within the last fortnight three members of my race have been burned at the stake; of these one was a woman. Not one of the three was charged with any crime even remotely connected with the abuse of a white woman. In every case murder was the sole accusation. All of these burnings took place in broad daylight, and two of them occurred on Sunday afternoon in sight of a Christian church.

The years 1899 to 1904 were pivotal in African American history broadly and in the life of Booker T. Washington in particular. During this period, *Up from Slavery* was published and became the best-selling autobiography of an African American, a distinction it retained until the 1965 publication of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Students of history who engage the life and thought of Booker T. Washington by reading *Up from Slavery* and other primary sources that provide insight into his life, thought, and vision for Black people will gain deeper insight into the complexity and multidimensional leadership of African Americans in the twentieth century.

1904–1909

JACK JOHNSON

HOWARD BRYANT

STARTING IN 1898, TWO YEARS AFTER *PLESSY*, PUBLIC accommodations in the South—streetcars, bathrooms, buses, restaurants, down to something as simple as a drinking fountain—were segregated in a coordinated legislative assault. These laws were passed in every Southern state, from Louisiana and Mississippi to Georgia and Tennessee. By 1902, no segment of Southern society contained social ambiguity. In the North, Midwest, and West, there was equal unambiguity in regard to hierarchy. The American empire was a white one—and this was also evident in the realm of sports.

During this period, baseball and several of its nascent organized leagues had been integrated. White players, aware of the empire and their place in it, systematically removed the Black players from the field. They did this first not by edict but by violence. A late-nineteenth-century second baseman named Frank Grant had his calves and shins pierced so often by white players sliding deliberately into his legs—instead of the base—that he began wearing thin slabs of wood to protect them.

By the turn of the century, no organized white league fielded Black players. By the time of the first World Series in 1903, Black players were excluded from professional baseball.

But that very same year, a mirror was placed in the face of white supremacy. The mirror existed in reality, in the flesh and blood, fist and muscle, of a Black boxer, Jack Johnson. Born in 1878 in Galveston,

Texas, Jack Johnson, whose full name was John Arthur Johnson, became the World Colored Heavyweight champion in 1903.

Away from the speeches and the laws and the treaties that could be broken when backed by a gun, the true arena of white supremacy was inside the ring, one-on-one.

The white champions were protected by racism, by their refusal to fight Black champions. While John L. Sullivan and Jim Jeffries, the iconic names of early white boxing, built their legend without fear of losing to a Black man, those who encountered Jack Johnson were not as fortunate. It would take more than two thousand fights before a white champion accepted Johnson's challenge to fight—and finally put white supremacy to the test.

In 1908 in Australia, Johnson destroyed Tommy Burns to become the first Black man to win the heavyweight title. The writer Jack London, ringside for the fight, looked at Johnson in the ring, holding the mirror up to white America—the entire white race, actually—and saw the mediocre reflection of Burns, who could not beat Johnson or save them. It was London who birthed the term the "great white hope."

That ignited the search for a fighter, as *The New York Times* would write often, who could restore the dignity of the white race. The search reintroduced Jeffries, spawned the "fight of the century," and articulated the white desire—through the defeat of this singular symbolic Black man—to prove that its quest for white empire was not constructed on a faulty blueprint. London, in his account of the Johnson-Burns fight, had offered these final words: "But one thing remains. Jeffries must emerge from his alfalfa farm and remove that smile from Johnson's face. Jeff, it's up to you."

But in 1910 Johnson pummeled and humiliated the unretired, now-mediocre Jeffries. White rioting resulted in the deaths of twenty-six Black people in incidents across the country.

The spectacle Johnson created in the ring showed America what it truly was: a nation that espoused the aspiration to freedom and equality but demanded white supremacy. His challenge shifted from inside the ring to outside it. Johnson, once he became a national figure, took on the characteristics of myth quickly and completely. Symbolically, he represented the Black male in the white nightmare: strong and

indomitable—and oversexed in his preference and appetite for white women. He became so symbolic that his existence appears almost to be a caricature or a deliberate construction of the prototypical embodiment of all white fears of Black masculinity.

By extension, Johnson also became symbolic of Black freedom—the freedom to wear gold teeth, to kiss white women in public, to marry them in private (and thus to be desired and not repulsed), to drive expensive cars, to take America's material ostentatiousness—the fruits of empire intended only for whiteness—and keep it all for himself. Johnson did all this and more at a time when most Black Americans were laboring to survive in homes and fields.

In 1910 Congress passed the White Slave Traffic Act, prohibiting the transporting of white women across state lines. That brought Johnson down, eventually sending him to prison due to his marriage to a white woman. He then became the rallying point for a quest for reputational rehabilitation for the ensuing century.

What happens to the person when they become a symbol? Can they be recovered? Can they exist beyond what they embody? In this wrestling over symbols, the individual is sacrificed. They become the unknown. Johnson's eternal value to the American story has never received the balance of most historical figures who are viewed as part person, part of the times in which they lived. Johnson is almost completely defined by his time period—what his presence meant to the white order, his threat to empire. While rogue to some Blacks, offensive to others, inspiration to others still, he was just a man—except to whites who viewed him as a threat. America is unwilling, except in the strictest academic terms, to label Johnson's years the most calculatedly racist period of the twentieth century, and because of that unwillingness, it talks about itself through Johnson.

So this fascinating man of morbid defiance—neither heroic nor villainous—lives on as an almost mythological barometer. There is, in all this, a certain exploitation at work, for the price Johnson paid was not the 117 years he and his reputation lived unpardoned for the crime of marrying a white woman. Rather, America's inability to reconcile even the clearest truths about its foundations meant his personal humanity has never received the proper priority. It was never about him.

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1909–1914

THE BLACK PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

BEVERLY GUY-SHEFTALL

THE ACCEPTANCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AS intellectuals—thinking women—has been elusive, but we have a long history as producers of knowledge, even when that production has not been fully recognized.

An example is the American Negro Academy (ANA), the first learned society of persons of African descent in the United States, which was founded in Washington, D.C., in March 1897 by seventy-eight-year-old Reverend Alexander Crummell. Born in New York City and educated at Queens' College, Cambridge, Reverend Crummell was an Episcopalian minister, educator, and missionary, as well as one of the most prominent and visionary nineteenth-century Black intellectuals. The ANA did not bar women from membership (limiting them to fifty), but during its thirty-one-year existence it remained an all-male organization from 1897 to 1924. Its constitution announces itself as "an organization of authors, scholars, artists, and those distinguished in other walks of life, men of African descent, for the promotion of Letters, Science, and Art." Its overall goal was to "lead and protect their people" and be a mighty "weapon to secure equality and destroy racism."

The ANA's specific objectives were to defend Black people against racist attacks; publish scholarship about the Black experience by Black authors; foster higher education and intellectual projects; promote literature, science, and art in the Black community; and create a

Black intellectual elite, whom W.E.B. Du Bois would later conceptualize as the "talented tenth." During this era, many Black women intellectuals made outstanding contributions, among them Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Fannie Barrier Williams, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, and Ida Wells-Barnett. Yet not one of them was ever invited to join the ANA. Though they believed a natural alliance existed between them and Black men, they were rejected on the basis of their sex.

More recently, a small group of predominantly Black feminist scholars has been responsible for reconstructing the androcentric African American intellectual and activist tradition by making visible Black women's significant contributions to political discourse on a range of issues going back to the nineteenth century. An example of these reclamation projects is my own 1995 collection, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, which makes the case for a robust Black women's intellectual tradition dating back to 1831, with the publication of Maria Stewart's speeches.

The period 1909–14 was pivotal in the annals of African American political history. Perhaps the best-known civil rights occurrence was the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. Ida Wells-Barnett, the legendary antilynching crusader, journalist, newspaper editor, clubwoman, and suffragist, was one of only two Black women signers of the 1908 call for the establishment of the organization.

Less well known than the NAACP was the founding, by white reformer Frances Kellor, of the New York–based National League for the Protection of Colored Women in 1905. Four years later Nannie Helen Burroughs founded the National Training School for Women and Girls in Washington, D.C. In 1910 the league merged with the Committee for the Improvement of Industrial Conditions Among Negroes in New York. Renamed the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes, it was a precursor of the National Urban League, founded in 1920.

Other significant developments in Black political history during this period include Margaret Murray Washington's 1912 founding of *National Notes*, the newsletter of the influential National Association

of Colored Women (established in 1896); and the founding of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) by Marcus Garvey and Amy Jacques Garvey in Jamaica in 1914.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett's "Lynch Law in America," written in 1900, is a powerful critique of the institutionalized racism and sexism that render Black men and women vulnerable to previously unspeakable acts of violence. Less visible in the annals of history is her militant struggle for woman suffrage. In the summer of 1913, Illinois had passed the landmark Equal Suffrage Act, which granted women in the state limited suffrage. That year, in one of this period's most significant yet historically occluded political occurrences, Wells-Barnett founded the Alpha Suffrage Club in Chicago. It was the first Black woman suffrage organization, committed to enhancing Black women's civic profile by encouraging them to vote for and help elect Black candidates, especially men; in 1915 it would be critical to the election of Oscar De Priest as the first Black alderman in Chicago.

Wells-Barnett founded the club because Black women were prohibited from joining white suffrage organizations, such as the National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA). In 1913 NAWSA organized the Woman Suffrage Parade in Washington, D.C., to garner broad support for the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. But because Southern white women were opposed to integration and to granting suffrage to Black women, the parade's organizers informed club president Wells-Barnett that she and her sixty-five members could march only in the segregated Black section at the back of the parade.

As instructed by the NAWSA organizers, most Black women, including club members, participated in the march at the rear, but Wells-Barnett refused. When the all-white Chicago delegation drew near, she left the crowd and joined that procession. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* captured an iconic image of Wells-Barnett marching with the Illinois delegation.

By 1916, the Alpha Suffrage Club had nearly two hundred members and published a newsletter entitled *The Alpha Suffrage Record.*

Ignoring or minimizing the political work and writing of African American women such as Ida Wells-Barnett renders invisible the important ways these women have contributed to a broad range of social justice initiatives, such as the passage of antilynching legislation, the attainment of voting rights for women regardless of race and national origin, and the election of Black officials. Black freedom struggles and women's liberation movements since then would not have been possible without the courageous and visionary leadership of Ida Wells-Barnett and the brilliant strategizing of women's organizations such as the Alpha Suffrage Club in the early twentieth century.

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1914–1919

THE GREAT MIGRATION

ISABEL WILKERSON

THEY FLED AS IF UNDER A SPELL OR A HIGH FEVER. "THEY left as though they were fleeing some curse," wrote the scholar Emmett J. Scott. "They were willing to make almost any sacrifice to obtain a railroad ticket, and they left with the intention of staying."

It was the middle of the second decade of the twentieth century, and the vast majority of African Americans were still bound to the South, to the blood-and-tear-stained soil of their enslaved forebearents. It had been twenty years since *Plessy v. Ferguson* formalized an authoritarian Jim Crow regime that controlled every aspect of life for African Americans, from where they could sit in a railroad car to which door they could walk into at a theater to the menial labors to which they were consigned. They were now bearing the full weight of a racial caste system intended to resurrect the hierarchy of slavery and were living under the daily terror of its brutal enforcement.

By this time, an African American was being lynched every four days somewhere in the American South, and for the majority of African Americans, as the Southern writer David Cohn would later put it, "their fate was in the laps of the gods."

The incendiary film *Birth of a Nation* premiered in 1915, romanticizing the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, glorifying the very violence to which African Americans were being subjected, and helping to revive the Ku Klux Klan. Across the Atlantic Ocean, the nations of Europe were at war in what was being called the War to End All Wars, which had begun in 1914 and had disrupted European immi-

gration to the United States just as the industrial North needed more workers for its factories and steel mills. Northern labor agents traveled to the South to recruit cheap Black labor, and word spread among Black Southerners that the North was opening up.

It was then that a silent pilgrimage took its first tentative steps, within the borders of this country. It began without warning or notice or very much in the way of understanding by those outside its reach. The nation's servant class was now breaking free of the South, in quiet rivulets at first and then in a sea of ultimately 6 million people whose actions would reshape racial distribution of the United States. It would come to be called the Great Migration.

Its beginning is traced to the winter of 1916, when *The Chicago Defender* made note in a single paragraph that that February, several hundred Black families had quietly departed Selma, Alabama, declaring, according to the newspaper's brief citation, that the "treatment doesn't warrant staying."

This was the start of what would become a leaderless revolution, one of the largest mass relocations in American history. It would come to dwarf in size and scope the California gold rush of the 1850s, with its 100,000 participants, and the 1930s Dust Bowl migration of some 300,000 people from Oklahoma and Arkansas to California. But more remarkably, it reshaped the racial makeup of the country as we know it, and it was the first mass act of independence for a people who were in bondage in this country far longer than they have been free.

The families from Selma, and the millions who followed, carried the same hopes as anyone who ever crossed the Atlantic or the Rio Grande. Over the decades of the Great Migration, a good portion of all Black Americans alive picked up and left the tobacco farms of Virginia, the rice plantations of South Carolina, the cotton fields in East Texas and Mississippi, and the villages and backwoods of the remaining Southern states. They set out for cities they had whispered of or had seen in a mail-order catalog.

They followed three major streams, paralleling the railroad lines that carried them to what they hoped would be freedom. Those in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia went

up the East Coast to Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Those in Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas went to Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, and elsewhere in the Midwest. Those in Louisiana, Texas, and Oklahoma went to Los Angeles, Oakland, Seattle, and elsewhere on the West Coast.

They were seeking political asylum within their own country, not unlike refugees in other parts of the world fleeing famine, war, and pestilence, only they were fleeing Southern terror. In May 1916, just months into the migration, fifteen thousand men, women, and children gathered to watch eighteen-year-old Jesse Washington be burned alive in Waco, Texas. The crowd, one of the largest ever gathered to witness a lynching, chanted, "Burn, burn, burn," as Washington was lowered into the flames. It was a reminder to those contemplating the migration that, however heartbroken they were to leave the loved ones who chose to stay, the region of their birth was not changing anytime soon.

"Oftentimes, just to go away," wrote John Dollard, a Yale anthropologist who would later study the rural South, "is one of the most aggressive things that another person can do, and if the means of expressing discontent are limited, as in this case, it is one of the few ways in which pressure can be put."

As it was, in the early years of the Great Migration, the South did everything it could to keep the people from leaving. Southern authorities resorted to coercion to keep their cheap labor in place. In Albany, Georgia, the police came and tore up the tickets of colored passengers waiting to board. A minister in South Carolina, having seen his parishioners off, was arrested at the station on the charge of helping colored people get out. In Savannah, the police arrested every colored person at the station regardless of where he or she was going. In Summit, Mississippi, authorities closed the ticket office and did not let northbound trains stop when there were large groups of colored people waiting to get on.

Instead of stemming the tide, the blockades and arrests "served to intensify the desire to leave," wrote the sociologist Charles S. Johnson, "and to provide further reasons for going."

The refugees could not know what was in store for them and for their descendants at their destinations or what effect their exodus would have on the country. In the receiving stations of the North and West, they faced a headwind of resistance and hostility. Redlining and restrictive covenants would keep them trapped in segregated colonies in the cities to which they fled. Many unions would deny them membership, keeping their wages lower than those of their white immigrant counterparts. And after the war, during the Red Summer of 1919, racial tensions and resentments boiled over as race riots erupted in cities across the country.

The riot in Chicago began on July 27, 1919, when a seventeen-year-old Black boy named Eugene Williams, swimming along the shore of Lake Michigan, drifted past an invisible line in the water into the white side of the Twenty-ninth Street beach. He drowned after someone hurled a rock at him. Within hours, a riot was in full cry, coursing through the South and Southwest Sides of the city for thirteen days, killing 38 people (23 Blacks and 15 whites) and injuring 537 others (342 Blacks, 178 whites, the rest unrecorded), and not ending until a state militia subdued it.

And yet despite outbreaks such as these, 6 million Black Southerners chose to seek the relative freedoms of the North and West, where they built churches and civic clubs, made enough money to send some back home to their loved ones in the South, could send their children to schools open for full semesters rather than tied to the schedule of the cotton field, and sent a message to the South that African Americans had options and were willing to take them.

"I went to the station to see a friend who was leaving," a person quoted by Emmett J. Scott observed shortly after the migration began. "I could not get in the station. There were so many people turning like bees in a hive."

The Great Migration grew out of the unmet promises made after the Civil War, and the sheer weight of it helped push the country toward the civil rights revolutions of the 1960s. It would proceed in waves in the following decades, not ending until the 1970s, and it would set in motion changes in the North and South that no one, not even the people doing the leaving, could have imagined at the start of

it or dreamed would take nearly a lifetime to play out. When the migration began, 90 percent of all African Americans were living in the South. By the time it was over, 47 percent of all African Americans were living in the North and West. A rural people had become urban, and a Southern people had spread themselves all over the nation. They fled north and west as they did during slavery.

It was a "folk movement of inestimable moment," the Mississippi historian Neil McMillen said.

And more than that, it was the second big step the nation's servant class ever took without asking.

1919–1924

RED SUMMER

MICHELLE DUSTER

I CAME OF AGE ON THE SOUTH SIDE OF CHICAGO IN THE WAKE of the 1968 urban rebellions. Too young to remember the mass destruction, violence, and tensions of the actual rebellions, I knew only that the South and West Sides of the city did not have the same prosperous look and opportunities as downtown Chicago and the North Side. The sharp racial division between white, Black, Asian, and Hispanic neighborhoods within the city was normal to me.

The magnet high school I attended was located on the other side of the city, so every day I commuted for an hour and a half each way through various Black neighborhoods on the South Side, crossed through the racially diverse downtown area, then over to another Black section on the Near West Side. Public transportation ran with varying efficiency depending on the part of the city in which I traveled. Boarded-up buildings, vacant lots, concentrated high-rise public housing units, fast-food places, barbershops, nail salons, bars, liquor stores, factories, and steel mills were prevalent in Black neighborhoods. The racial concentration also produced many Black-owned companies such as Soft Sheen, Johnson Publishing Company, Parker House Sausage, Army & Lou's Soul Food Restaurant, *The Chicago Defender*, and Seaway Bank. The racial concentration was similar to what my great-grandmother, Ida B. Wells, saw as a Chicago resident all those years ago.

As I navigated the city, I knew there were certain neighborhoods to avoid, such as Bridgeport, Marquette Park, Humboldt Park, and

Canaryville, because of the racist hostility demonstrated by the white people who lived there. Stories of Black people being beaten with bats, bricks, or other weapons, if they were unfortunate enough to end up in that part of town, were well known. I also remember hearing stories of Black people having bricks thrown through their windows or experiencing bombings or other forms of harassment when they tried to cross the deeply entrenched racial line and move into certain predominantly white neighborhoods.

Little did I know that the divide, hostility, and violence were a continuum of the issues that caused the 1919 Race Riot, in which thirty-eight people—twenty-three Black and fifteen white—were killed and over five hundred were injured. The tension had been fueled by a combination of several factors that included job opportunities, housing availability, and the dynamics of World War I. Chicago was among many cities that experienced riots, which gave the summer of 1919 the nickname "Red Summer."

During the Great Migration, the population of Black people in Chicago increased by 148 percent, while the area of the city that welcomed them remained the same. White people did everything they could to keep Black people separate. Restrictive covenants were enforced and redlining was in full force to confine Black people to a small thirty-block section of the city known as the Black Belt.

Near the Black Belt was a neighborhood dominated by white Irish and Lithuanian immigrants who mostly worked in the stockyards. Their attempts to unionize, plus a shortage of workers due to World War I, induced the stockyard owners to bring in Black migrants to work, undercutting the employment of white men. Resentment and tension rose between the two groups.

In addition, Black soldiers returned from World War I, where they had fought for democracy overseas only to be met with resentment and violence once they got home. The sight of their uniforms created ire among racist white people. Trained to fight, the Black veterans were not willing to accept second-class citizenship.

Racial tension gradually increased, and on July 27, 1919, it boiled over into a full-blown white invasion of Black neighborhoods. The violence mostly took place on the South Side, near the stockyards,

which was inhabited by working-class white immigrants, and in the Black Belt area. In the aftermath, at the beginning of 1920, a deep level of suspicion between Black Americans and white immigrants remained.

City and state leaders and officials decided to "study" the problem. The Chicago Commission on Race Relations was formed and was led by Black sociologist Charles S. Johnson. After two and a half years, a 651-page report titled *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* was produced, which included findings of systemic racism along with almost five dozen recommendations on how to solve some of the problems. To this day, the city has yet to implement most of them.

Over one hundred years after the riot, Chicago boasts a diverse population that is almost equally—30 percent each—white, Black, and Hispanic, and about 5 percent Asian. Over 30 percent of residents speak a language other than English. However, there remains extreme housing segregation as a remnant of official redlining and restrictive covenants that were enacted in the early 1920s, the "white flight" that took place in the 1950s and '60s, and public policies that concentrated racialized poverty and underinvestment in predominantly Black neighborhoods.

During Mayor Richard J. Daley's reign over the city from 1955 to 1976, high-rise public housing units were built in Black neighborhoods, creating a high concentration of racialized poverty. During Mayor Michael Bilandic's term, there was benign neglect of the Black sections of town, which was demonstrated during the 1979 blizzard: the streets in the downtown area were cleaned, while the Black neighborhoods remained buried in snow. The next mayor, Jane Byrne, campaigned on the promise of equal snow removal for all neighborhoods. When Harold Washington was elected in 1983 as the first Black mayor, he was met with a virulent group of aldermen nicknamed the "Vrdolyak 29" who did everything in their power to block his initiatives.

Twenty years later, when Mayor Richard M. Daley, the son of the earlier Mayor Daley, dismantled high-rise public housing units, residents faced many barriers to moving into predominantly white areas

of the city. The reality of the resulting "mixed-income housing" was that poor Black people moved into lower- or middle-class Black neighborhoods. The idea of Black Chicagoans sharing in educational, economic, and housing opportunity was hard fought against, as was evident in the early 2010s, when Mayor Rahm Emanuel closed more than fifty schools and several mental health clinics in predominantly Black neighborhoods on the South and West Sides. That decision, combined with the uneven distribution of tax incremental financing (TIF) money, led to significant investment in downtown and the North Side and contributed to the underdevelopment of the South and West Sides. These developments represented a continuum of policies that negatively affect Black people, who still live in highly segregated neighborhoods.

After the 1919 Chicago Race Riot, the city responded by implementing and maintaining policies that kept racial segregation in place. One hundred years later the city is considered "global," boasts gleaming tall buildings, and is home to many multinational corporations. Its residents also have a thirty-year discrepancy in life expectancy, depending on the neighborhood in which they reside. Racial disparities are evident in education, employment, income, home ownership, property values, crime, relationship with the police, access to healthcare and healthy food—all related to racially segregated neighborhoods.

For decades Chicago has worked to overcome deeply entrenched racial separation and divisions that have been part of the fabric and makeup of the city. The 2019 election of Mayor Lori Lightfoot—the first African American and openly lesbian woman to hold the position—could be a step toward the progress the city needs. The fact that Lightfoot is a North Sider married to a white woman challenges some of the racial and geographic divides. And the fact that she won all fifty wards during the election suggests that residents in every part of the city were ready for a change. In the twenty-first century, Chicago might finally live up to the promises and expectations outlined by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations in the aftermath of the 1919 Race Riot.

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1924–1929

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

FARAH JASMINE GRIFFIN

BY THE SUMMER OF 1924, WHEN INFLUENTIAL OBSERVERS began to take note of the artistic flowering known as the Harlem Renaissance, Harlem was already an exciting and vibrant Black enclave.

Blacks had started moving to the area in the early decades of the century and it could boast at least four major publications. Socialists Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph founded *The Messenger* and published editorials exploring "The New Negro" as early as 1920. They asserted an ascendant political and economic militancy among the new generation of Black people who populated Harlem. In addition to *The Messenger*, *The Crisis* (1910), published by the NAACP and edited by the formidable W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey's *Negro World* (1918), and the Urban League's magazine *Opportunity* (1923) were all important shapers of an emerging Black public sphere.

The *Crisis* literary editor Jessie Fauset published many of the young writers who would become literary lights of the Renaissance. However, in 1924 *Opportunity* upstaged both *The Crisis* and Fauset by announcing itself as the vehicle that would usher Harlem's writers to mainstream publishers, critics, and reviewers.

In March 1924, sociologist Charles Johnson, director of the Urban League and editor of *Opportunity*, hosted a now-legendary dinner at the Civic Club, widely hailed as "the first act of the Harlem Renaissance." The dinner was not so much the start of the Renaissance as its public coming-out. The evening was planned as a tribute to Fauset for

her tireless efforts on behalf of Black writers and for the publication of her novel *There Is Confusion.* Instead, the event served to highlight the younger writers and offered them valuable introductions to members of the white literary establishment who were in attendance.

Two writers who would become the brightest stars of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, were absent that evening. Having already published works in *The Crisis* and *Opportunity,* both were on the brink of very promising literary careers, but neither had relocated to New York. By August 1924, the literary flowering that had started with the publication of Jean Toomer's *Cane* in 1923 was fully under way, attracting a bevy of young artists drawn by the energy, community, and opportunity of the Black Mecca.

Significantly, a future literary great made his arrival in Harlem that summer as well. James A. Baldwin was born at Harlem Hospital in August 1924. He would come of age in a Harlem shaped by, but quite different from, the heady days of the 1920s.

In spite of the cultural ascendancy of Harlem, the summer of 1924 offered continued challenges to Black people. That summer the Ku Klux Klan was present and influential at both the Democratic and Republican national conventions, and lynching was still prevalent throughout the South. Harlem was fully aware of these horrific conditions, as many of its inhabitants had fled virulent racism. Once they arrived in Harlem, they devoted themselves to the fight against it. If the artists sought creative freedom, they also saw themselves as participants in a larger movement that asserted the humanity of Black people. Johnson, Du Bois, and others saw the arts as central to the struggle for full citizenship.

In 1925 Howard University philosopher Alain Locke guest-edited a special issue of the journal *Survey Graphic,* titled "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro." Devoted to life in Harlem, featuring essays by Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, and a number of promising younger writers, the special issue quickly sold out. Its popularity led to the anthology *The New Negro,* also edited by Locke and published in 1925, which according to Arnold Rampersad

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not only served to "certify the existence of a great awakening in Black America but also to endow it with a Bible."

Meanwhile in 1925 Hughes, who first published in *The Crisis,* and Hurston, whose writings would appear in *Opportunity,* came from Washington, D.C., to Harlem. The painter Aaron Douglas relocated as well. In May the *New York Herald Tribune* became the first publication to use the phrase "Negro Renaissance" to describe the flowering of art. *The Crisis* launched its literary prizes and a research project on the social conditions of American Blacks. The first prizes were issued in August 1925.

Although best known for an abundance of literary work, the Renaissance produced music and visual art as well. Louis Armstrong parted with his mentor King Oliver to join the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra and came to the city that was as big as his sound—New York. Bessie Smith and other blues queens were among the most popular musical artists of the day. Both Hurston and Hughes attended rent parties and after-hours joints where they might hear Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, and Willie "the Lion" Smith, musical giants who would join the partying crowd after they'd finished performing in some of Harlem's whites-only clubs. Also in attendance were Black workers and Black debutantes, whites in search of a little excitement, and members of Harlem's thrilling, vibrant, and brilliant queer community.

Like their contemporaries, Hurston and Hughes found sponsors among wealthy whites, philanthropist friends of the Negro. Amy Spingarn, an artist and philanthropist, gave Hughes the funds he needed to attend Lincoln University. Hurston met Annie Nathan Meyer, author and founder of Barnard College, at the second *Opportunity* dinner in March 1925. Meyer offered her a spot at Barnard that evening and later helped her find the resources she needed to attend.

In 1926 some of the movement's inherent tensions surfaced. Nowhere is this more notable than in two of the year's most significant publications, the singular issue of the journal *FIRE!!* and "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" by Langston Hughes. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" is the aesthetic manifesto of a gen-

eration. It is boldly assertive, unabashedly in love with Black people, and insistent on the value of Black vernacular culture. Hughes's metaphor of the racial mountain takes on several meanings. Here it is an "urge within the race toward whiteness." It is that which the Black artist must climb "in order to discover himself and his people." It is the rocky road, but one that ends with the younger Black artists "building temples for tomorrow . . . on top of the mountain, free within ourselves." If "Racial Mountain" provides the theory, *FIRE!!* is the practice.

FIRE!! appeared only once, in November 1926, but remains a lasting document of the period. Having been nurtured and chided by their elders, Hughes, Hurston, and Douglas, along with Wallace Thurman, Richard Bruce Nugent, and others, joined forces to produce a groundbreaking publication. The issue contained fiction, drama, essays, and visual imagery focusing on both urban and rural Blacks. The group met at Hurston's or Douglas's apartment, where they edited manuscripts, made design decisions, and produced a work by Black people free of the oversight of their Black elders and white funders. The issue contained Nugent's beautiful and impressionistic story of queer desire, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade"; Hurston's "Color Struck and Sweat"; poetry by Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Helene Johnson; and drawings by Douglas and others. It was a beautiful hand grenade, a modernist gem.

At the beginning of 1927, Hurston received a fellowship under the direction of Columbia's Franz Boas. Armed with a pistol and driving herself, she ventured south to collect folklore in a land where the threat of racial violence, lynching, and rape was real. She would spend the next two years there collecting material that she eventually published in the groundbreaking *Mules and Men.*

If Hurston turned her attention to folklore, 1928 saw the ascendancy of the novel as preferred form: Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem.* Du Bois's *Dark Princess.* Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun.* Newcomer Nella Larsen's *Quicksand.* Larsen, who would later be dubbed the "mystery woman of the Harlem Renaissance," was for a brief moment a favorite writer of Du Bois for her depiction of the Black elite and the talented tenth, and what he saw as her critical dissection of the

absurdity of racial classification. What he missed was her exploration of female sexual desire and her critique of the elite's adherence to respectability and its own racial hypocrisy. *Quicksand* would be followed by *Passing* in 1929. Both novels were critical successes and ensured Larsen a prominent place among Harlem's literary lights.

In the shadows of the literary lights, economic desperation was growing among Harlem's Black residents. Whites owned more than 80 percent of Harlem businesses. But following the Wall Street crash in October 1929, fewer and fewer white people came to Harlem in search of a good time. When Hurston returned to Harlem that year, she confronted enormous poverty and Harlem friends "all tired and worn out—looking like death eating crackers." But when she visited her white benefactor, Charlotte Osgood Mason, there was no evidence of the Great Depression in her penthouse. She ate caviar and capon.

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1929–1934

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

ROBIN D. G. KELLEY

The Fascist racketeers were no fools. They understood the psychology of their starving victims. Their appeal to them was irresistible. It went something like this: "Run the niggers back to the country where they came from—Africa! They steal the jobs away from us white men because they lower wages. Our motto is therefore: *America for Americans!*"

ANYONE LIVING IN DONALD TRUMP'S AMERICA WILL FIND these words eerily familiar; the author's name, not so much. When Angelo Herndon penned this passage over eight decades ago, the twenty-four-year-old with a sixth-grade education was one of the most famous Black men in America. He had spent almost three years in a Georgia jail cell, about five years in Southern coal mines, and at least two years as a Communist organizer in the Deep South.

Herndon's conviction under Georgia's insurrection statute and his subsequent defense made the handsome young radical a cause célèbre. His story upends typical Great Depression images of despondent men and women in breadlines and soup kitchens, waiting for Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal to save the day.

Instead, the story of thousands of Angelo Herndons is a story of Black antifascism.

As American finance capital eagerly floated loans to the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, and *Fortune, The Saturday Evening Post,* and *The New Republic* ran admiring spreads on Italian Fascism, Black radicals called out and resisted homegrown fascism in the form of lynch law, the suppression of workers' organizations and virtually all forms of dissent, and the denial of civil and democratic rights to Black citizens. As this was the state of affairs in much of the United States long before Mussolini's rise, Black radicals not only anticipated fascism, they resisted before it was considered a crisis. As Herndon aptly put it, his case was "a symbol of the clash between Democracy and Fascism."

Born Eugene Angelo Braxton on May 6, 1913 or 1914, he and his seven siblings grew up poor mainly in Alabama, though by his own account he was born in Wyoming, Ohio. His parents, Paul Braxton and Harriet Herndon, both hailed from the Black Belt town of Union Church, just southeast of Montgomery, in Bullock County, Alabama. Angelo was barely five years old when their father succumbed to "miners' pneumonia" and his death sent Harriet and her children back to Union Church, where she sharecropped to make ends meet. In 1926 Angelo (thirteen) and Leo (fifteen) worked in the coalfields of Lexington, Kentucky, before moving in with their aunt Sallie Herndon in Birmingham, Alabama.

In 1930 Angelo was working for the Tennessee Coal and Iron company in Birmingham when the fledgling Communist Party began organizing there. He was primed for its message of militant class struggle and racial justice, having once dreamed of organizing "some kind of a secret society that was to arm itself with guns and ammunition and retaliate against the Ku Klux Klan and the American Legion." On May 22, he attended his first Communist-led mass meeting and listened to party leaders denounce racism, segregation, and lynching, and demand that Black people have the right to equality and national self-determination—that is, the right of the subjugated Black majority in the South to secede from the United States and form a truly democratic government if they so desired. This position, adopted by the Communist International in 1928, promoted not separatism but rather the rights of a subjugated nation to choose. Consequently, the policy led the party to greater support for civil rights and racial justice. Impressed with the Communists for fighting for all workers and for advocating openly for "Negro rights," teenaged Angelo joined the party that night.

Using his birth name, Eugene Braxton, he immediately threw himself into the work, organizing coal miners, the unemployed, and sharecroppers, and spending many a night in an Alabama jail cell. The political situation heated up in March 1931, when nine young Black men were pulled from a freight train near Paint Rock, Alabama, and falsely accused of raping two white women. Following a hasty trial, all the defendants except the youngest were sentenced to death. The Communist-led International Labor Defense (ILD) built an international campaign to defend the "Scottsboro Boys," eventually leading to their release.

Meanwhile, in the fall of 1931, the party dispatched Herndon to Atlanta. The reputedly liberal city had become a hotbed of fascism. Between March and May 1930, Atlanta police arrested six Communist leaders—Morris H. Powers, Joseph Carr, Mary Dalton, and Ann Burlak, all white—and African Americans Herbert Newton and Henry Storey. The state charged the Atlanta Six, as they came to be known, under a nineteenth-century statute that made it potentially a capital crime for anyone to incite insurrection or distribute insurrectionary literature.

Liberals across the country objected to this arcane law largely on the grounds that it violated free speech. Most white Atlantans, however, were less concerned with the party's incendiary literature than with its interracialism. That white women and Black men had attended an antilynching meeting together was an egregious violation of Southern conduct and the primary reason for their arrests.

Unemployment fueled the party's growth in Atlanta, which in turn fueled the fascist movement. During the summer of 1930, about 150 Atlanta business leaders, American Legionnaires, and key figures in law enforcement founded the American Fascisti Association and Order of Black Shirts. Their goals were to "foster the principles of white supremacy" and make the city (and its jobs) white. The Black Shirts held a march on August 22, 1930, carrying placards that read "Niggers, back to the cotton fields—city jobs are for white folks."

Since the Black Shirts were of the better class, the anti-insurrection statute did not apply to them, though they earned the ire of merchants and housewives who feared losing access to cheap Black labor,

and of unemployed white men who got black shirts but no jobs. By 1932, the city began denying Black Shirts parade permits and charters, though racial terror and discrimination continued unabated.

As the Atlanta Six appealed their case, Angelo Herndon became the next victim caught in the web of Georgia's insurrection statute. On June 30, 1932, he led a march of over one thousand Black and white workers to city hall that forced the city to add $6,000 to local relief aid. Twelve days later Herndon was arrested while picking up his mail, and police searched his room without a warrant. They discovered a small cache of leaflets, pamphlets, Communist newspapers, and books by George Padmore and Bishop William Montgomery Brown.

Initially charged simply for being a Communist, on July 22 Herndon was indicted for violating the insurrection statute. The ILD retained two local Black lawyers, John H. Geer and Benjamin Davis, Jr., the latter a scion of a prominent Black Republican family who would go on to become a national leader in the Communist Party.

The rabidly anti-Communist prosecutor, John Hudson, sought the death penalty for Herndon for possessing the material. But Davis and Geer showed that the material in Herndon's possession was readily available in the public library. And Davis turned the tables by insisting that "lynching is insurrection" and that the systematic exclusion of Black people from the jury pool was a violation of Herndon's rights, rendering any indictment against him invalid.

On January 18, 1933, an all-white jury found Herndon guilty but spared him execution by sentencing him to eighteen to twenty years on the chain gang. After securing his release on bail in October 1934, the ILD sent Herndon on a national tour to talk about his case in the larger struggle against class oppression, racial injustice, and fascism. "Today, when the world is in danger of being pushed into another blood-bath," he warned in one of his stump speeches, "when Negroes are being shot down and lynched wholesale, when every sort of outrage is taking place against the masses of people—today is the time to act."

The tour ended after the U.S. Supreme Court rejected his appeal, sending him back to prison in October 1935. His legal team then

turned to the insurrection statute itself and succeeded in convincing a Fulton County Superior Court judge that the law was unconstitutional. Herndon was released again on bond three months after he returned to prison. Predictably, the Georgia supreme court rejected the lower court's ruling, setting the stage for a second appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, which in 1937 in a 5–4 decision finally struck down Georgia's insurrection statute, vacating Herndon's conviction for good.

But in 1935; as Herndon crisscrossed the country fighting for his life, the Nazis consolidated power in Germany, Japan occupied Manchuria, Britain and France tightened their grip on the colonies, and Mussolini invaded Ethiopia. Black radicals heeded Herndon's plea "to act," mobilizing in defense of Ethiopia, resisting lynch law in the South, organizing a global anticolonial movement, and defending Republican Spain from the fascists.

Angelo's brother, Milton Herndon, died fighting Franco's troops in the Spanish Civil War. He told his men why he was there: "Yesterday, Ethiopia. Today, Spain. Tomorrow, maybe America. Fascism won't stop anywhere—until we stop it." His words still ring true.

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1934–1939

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

BERNICE L. MCFADDEN

When I was a child, using the words *ain't, huh,* and *hey* would reap an icy gaze from an elder or, worse, a pinch or slap, followed by the correction:

Bernice, the word is:

Isn't. Yes. Hello.

Historically, so-called Bad English or improper grammar was attributed to poor and uneducated people. It was considered lazy English, created by "lazy" Blacks, those Africans who were enslaved in America and worked from can't see to can't see, bonded people who were quite literally worked to death.

My siblings and I were educated in private schools and spent summers in Barbados. We children were neither poor nor uneducated, so that sort of language was unacceptable in my household. We were expected to speak proper English if we aspired to be accepted and respected in the white world.

I grew up in a family that was Southern on my maternal side and Caribbean on my paternal side. These relatives had migrated and immigrated to New York, stubbornly clinging to the customs of their birth homes. So I was raised in a family full of interesting and complex dialects, all of which I adopted.

Truth is, Standard American English has never felt comfortable on my tongue. It is as unnatural to me as swimming fully clothed in the ocean. Today, even in middle age, I still speak in a dialect that I lovingly refer to as Yankee Bajan.

I discovered Zora Neale Hurston in the summer of 1987. I was twenty-one years old and an aspiring writer unsure of what or whom I wanted to write about.

When I opened *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* I was immediately struck by Hurston's use of dialect, and a door in my mind creaked loudly ajar.

In 1934 Hurston published her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine.* It was well received by readers and critics alike. Hurston was celebrated for her use of Negro dialect. "*Jonah's Gourd Vine* can be called without fear of exaggeration the most vital and original novel about the American Negro that has yet been written by a member of the Negro race," wrote Margaret Wallace in *The New York Times.* "Miss Hurston, who is a graduate of Barnard College and student of anthropology, has made the study of Negro folklore her special province. This may very well account for the brilliantly authentic flavor of her novel and for her excellent rendition of Negro dialect."

Perhaps Hurston's well-worded and sophisticated prose, set in contrast to the dialogue, led Wallace to assume that Hurston's education was what allowed her to expertly mimic the Southern Negro dialect. It probably never occurred to Wallace that this achievement was the result not of an education at a prominent academic institution but of Hurston's bilinguality. After all, Zora had been born in Alabama and raised in Florida, in towns populated by Black people. The people and their ways of communicating weren't foreign to her—she was writing about home.

Black language, now known as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), was born in the American South during slavery when bonded people, separated from their familial tribes, mixed with Africans who spoke different languages. In an effort to communicate with their fellow men and women—and their captors—they stitched together scraps of several languages, including that of their enslavers, and created the melodic and nuanced dialect that Hurston used in her work, a dialect that still survives today.

In 1936 Hurston was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to study the folk religions of Jamaica and Haiti. While in Haiti, she wrote, in

just seven weeks' time, *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* a story that she said "had been dammed up in me."

Published in the fall of 1937, during the Great Depression, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* centers on Janie Crawford, who finds herself married to the controlling Jody, a man who does not allow her to speak or communicate with friends. In contrast, when she meets Tea Cake, he is happy to hear what she has to say, encouraging her to share her thoughts and engage with others. This new relationship forges a feeling of empowerment and joy within Janie.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* Jody can be construed as a metaphor for white people eager to silence the thoughts and expressions of Black people.

But Zora Neale Hurston would not be muted.

The publication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was met with criticism. The harshest came from Richard Wright, who accused Hurston of writing into and not above the stereotypes and tropes that had plagued Black people from slavery into Jim Crow. It was his stance that if a Black person took up a pen to write, that pen should be used as a sword to wage war against the oppressive white racist regime. Anything less was a frivolous waste of ink and paper. "Miss Hurston can write, but her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley," Wright wrote.

> Her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes.
>
> Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the "white folks" laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears.

Their Eyes Were Watching God was taken out of print in 1938 and remained in obscurity for forty years, until writer Alice Walker

brought it back into the national spotlight. It was reissued in 1973, and the classic remains in print to this day.

Had Hurston bent to the will of her critics, she might have received her flowers while she was still alive. Ever the nonconformist, the willful Hurston, in her next book, yet again put the politics of race aside in favor of presenting Black people in all their glorious authenticity.

By the time Hurston published *Tell My Horse* in 1938, she was struggling financially. *Tell My Horse* is a travelogue of sorts, outlining the customs, superstitions, folk traditions, and religions found in Haiti and Jamaica. Hurston defied genre assignment by mixing and melding anthropology, folklore, and personal experience. This infuriated her critics. "It is a pity, therefore, that her real talents produced a work so badly—even carelessly—performed! She pays practically no attention to grammar or sentence structure," complained Reece Stuart, Jr.

One of Hurston's biographers, Robert Hemenway, describes *Tell My Horse* as "Hurston's poorest book, chiefly because of its form." Later that year Hurston reviewed Richard Wright's novel *Uncle Tom's Children* and had no qualms about repaying his unkindness, saying that Wright's writing was "so grim that the Dismal Swamp of race hatred must be where they live." Too much, too little, too late, Hurston's star had fallen and was slowly burning away in the cold, looming shadow of Richard Wright.

In 1939 Hurston returned to Florida and went to work for the Federal Writers' Project. Working alongside folklorist Stetson Kennedy, she and others collected songs and folktales from the culturally rich communities that dotted the Sunshine State. Hurston respected and revered the many iterations of Black language found in America and abroad and charged herself to do her part in collecting and preserving it for future generations.

For this, I am grateful God sent Zora Neale Hurston into the world. She has been a steady guide on this literary journey of mine. It is because of her refusal to participate in the contempt and erasure of Black dialect that I am able to proudly embrace and celebrate my bilinguality on and off the page.

GOD DON COME, he send. —Barbadian saying

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COILED AND UNLEASHED

PATRICIA SMITH

A whole people's tumble into raw, untested century began
with one man, penning his serpentine sojourn up from slavery—
I am not quite sure of the exact place or exact date of my birth,
but . . . I must have been born somewhere and at some time.
He began as another baby shoved directly into the wrong air.
Eavesdropping on the whispered blue archives of a scarring
passage—the passage that taught so well the gracelessness
of chains—Booker T. slowly untangled the acrid truths of his
own mother's bondage. He knew how gingerly his people
had to sidle toward that blaring northern star. And words,
like feral soldiers, lined up for him, crafting that careful story—
his stern and measured gospel, the only breath in his body.

Screeching a story that feels like the only breath in his body,
Du Bois upended Booker, angled for agitation, commanded
there be nothing hushed and unhurried about our freedom.
He preferred the uncompromising clench, the coil, the strident
voice and stalwart stride. *Make yourself do unpleasant things*
so as to gain the upper hand of your soul. He meant the soul
of Black folk, and that soul's upper hand was a fist—pierce
and pummel at the sleek white wall, prelude to the unfeigned,
unslaved voice. Restraint had no role or reason in revolution.
Between the tenets of those two men, a race strived to untangle
its convoluted root, urged its whole self forward, and hurtled
toward the door America had fought so hard to keep closed.

A thousand clamorous truths lurked behind that thick door.
To coax them loose, pens scarred its surface, keyboards clicked
and spat. In Chicago, which was destined to be ours, Black word
became Black bellow, warning of the menace seething behind
Jim Crow's burgeoning growl. Word was soundtrack, it was
solace, salvage, defender of the defenseless. The Black word
would learn to hide in the deep pockets of Pullman porters,
cooing the brethren north, it would slip on the silken shouts
of Hughes, Brooks, and Ida B., sing to soldiers of boundaries
that wailed their color. The *Defender* and *Crisis* harbored
the merciless Black word, the *us to us,* the tongue of tenement,
of chittlins and factory, spinning the fractured tale of that

furious north star and where it had always meant to lead us.
It led us to Madame CJ Walker, who slathered Black crowns
with grease that clung and stank like flowers, oil that crackled
under a toothed and rabid heat. She schooled us in that sweet
torture until we shamed our own mirrors, until our whole nappy
heads spat glow. And she raised fists of her own damned money,
from *us to us*. Blue-black and hallelujah-crowned, Madame CJ
Walker American-dreamed. The star led us to the sharecroppers'
boy, who knew no star was the end of free, who drove his body up
through ice and into a startling sky. Matthew Henson stepped into
that sky and planted the flag of a country that was not yet his.
Mahri-Pahluk, the Inuit called him. *Matthew. The Kind One.*

That furious star kept leading us north, and north—five decades
after Lincoln dragged ink across the only edict that mattered,
a wary Jubilee spanned the year. Soon after—as if a lock had
clicked open—frenzied migrants, wide-eyed and beguiled,
surged into depots in New York, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland
Philly and Pittsburgh, clutching our strapped cloth cases, with
tabasco leaking from the waxed paper seams of what was left
of our lunches. Dizzied by a conjured glare, we streamed into
tenements, placed mementos of our other selves on shadowbox

shelves, declared ourselves blessed, and sent hallelujahs back
down south, in carefully scripted letters that sloshed our new
city's cracked concrete with gold. *You got to come see, Pearl,*

it's better up here. Amos, there a job for every man who want one.
And Amos worked to beat the willful red dust off his hat and he
came, Pearl wrapped fried bread and peppered pork scraps
for the journey and she came, Annie cried loud in front
of her granddaddy's slantways old house and she came, Otis beat
down the little-boy fear in his belly and he came, Earl put one last
flower on Mary's grave and he came, Esther slow-folded all her
country clothes and she came, Willie started bragging all around
Mississippi 'bout some paycheck he didn't have yet and he came,
Eunice, Nona's baby girl, got her tangled hair pressed and plaited
for the first time and she came, we came, hauling even the things
we dreamed of owning, we came, loosing the noose, stepping

gingerly into the gaping mouths of cities, we came, just stunned
enough. We wrangled with wary merchants, waged war with
vermin, dragged our feet through bloodied butcher shop sawdust.
Some found jobs revolving around bland ritual—the putting in
or taking out or hammering on or the pulling apart of things.
We calmed the fussy clockwork of white babies, held them to
the wrong breast. We scarred skillets for another family's beans
and meat. We dug with *ain't-a-thang-different-but-the-dirt,* 'cause
all that black gold is buried somewhere. We were told that
all those vexing daily battles were ours, but real wars belonged to
everyone. Once again, we lunged lockstep into questions that white
American men had vowed to answer with their breath and bodies.

It was called the first war in the world, but it wasn't, it couldn't have
been, because we had forever been tending to wounds. When
that war shuddered to its close, the very same America held out
its skeletal arms and begged the brown soldiers back inside—
inside where their names were still a street-spat venom. Inside,
while their bodies still dripped from the thickest branches of trees,

inside, where they were whispered to be not men, but fractions of men. They returned to their homes in South Carolina and Texas, in DC and Chicago, in Omaha and Arkansas, and the air had not changed there. So the summer turned red and exploded, blood splattering storefronts, a war inside a quavering peace. Snarling white men killed to feed their hatred of hue, killed 1000 of us

to make America great again, to siphon all that dark trouble from between its shores. We fought back, coiling and unleashing a fury threaded in our stolen names. Incensed by our ease upon our own streets, our stolen names gracing storefronts, our control over our own lives, they torched the landscape flat in Tulsa, ignored the screams of its rightful citizens and curious children, they set us to flame. Wherever we were, whenever we dared upright, wherever we breathed out loud, they were—damning the boys in Scottsboro, disregarding the vile savage rampaging through men in Tuskegee. But, dammit, we phoenix, we. We renaissance and odes inked in tumult. We Billie warbling a fruit gone strange. And we still be Marian sanctifying that stage, singing her America while America said *There ain't a damned thing here that sounds like that.*

PART NINE