CHAPTER 2

A Chance to Make Good 1900–1929

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In 1900, ninety percent of all African Americans lived in the South; three-fourths of these eight million people inhabited rural communities. The 880,771 black Northerners, on the other hand, were decidedly urban; seventy-one percent lived in cities.

History and personal experience taught African Americans that their position in U.S. society could not be understood without understanding racism. But race was not the only basis for discrimination in American life. Nor was it the only way Americans defined themselves. Class and gender, along with religion, ethnicity, and age, also shaped lives, ideas, and dreams.

Perhaps, indeed, "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line," as W. E. B. Du Bois declared in 1903. But the significance and the composition of that line cannot be reduced to the biology of skin pigmentation. The meaning of race, and the practice of racism, were tightly intertwined with labor systems, ideas about family life, and assumptions about the relationship between manhood and citizenship. Du Bois recognized that it was impossible to understand the meaning of race without also understanding class. The place of African Americans in society was inseparable from their place in the economy.

In African-American history, images of victimization spring to mind as readily as notions of progress. Hope has most often bred disappointment and frequently disillusionment as well. In the early twentieth century, black Americans shared in the aspirations and expectations of their fellow citizens but did so as a people with a unique history and set of barriers to overcome.

African Americans argued among themselves as to what those barriers were made of; exactly where they were situated; how permanent they were; and whether they should be destroyed, circumvented, or hurdled. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, thousands of black men and women obliterated, removed, tiptoed around, climbed over, and even passed through these barriers. Others ignored them. Some resigned themselves to the limitations and pain these barriers produced, without accepting the notion that such obstacles were either natural or just. And still others suffered from the costs of pounding the barriers at times and in places where they were too deeply embedded in the social fabric to be breached.

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Making a Living

At the dawn of the twentieth century the color line, or the separation between whites and

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blacks, was most clear and most rigid in the South. With ninety-five percent of African Americans living south of the Ohio River and east of central Texas, this was also where the overwhelming majority of black people lived. Before the Civil War, the Ohio River and the Mason-Dixon line (separating Pennsylvania from Maryland) had marked the line between slavery and freedom—even though "freedom" in the North was limited by employment discrimination, barriers to voting and officeholding, and racial segregation.

In 1900, thirty-five years after emancipation, this boundary remained particularly meaningful to African Americans. South of the line, citizenship guaranteed little. To describe the condition of blacks in the South, both whites and blacks used a phrase first articulated by the United States Supreme Court in the 1857 case of *Dred Scott v. Sanford* to limit the scope of African-American citizenship before the Civil War: Blacks had "no rights which the white man was bound to respect." That was still the case in the South in 1900.

In the North, black men and women enjoyed the same legal rights as whites, but an informal color line set the races apart, limiting where blacks could work, live, and send their children to school. In the West, patterns somewhat resembled the North. In both regions African Americans lived mainly in cities. Because the black populations in Western states remained small, however, there tended to be greater flexibility and fewer restrictions. Indeed, blacks not only were barely visible in the West, but in many cases attracted less hostility than Asian and Mexican immigrants. Despite these significant variations, however, racism had become a part of American national culture. African Americans everywhere were likely to earn less than whites, work longer hours at less desirable jobs (or be unemployed), and confront limitations on where they could go and what they could do. The story of the twentieth century begins where the restrictions were the most concrete and wide ranging, and where most African Americans lived and worked: in the South.

As the century opened, four-fifths of all black Southerners lived in rural communities. Most were members of families who earned their living from the land. What they planted depended largely on where they lived. Tobacco remained important in Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky. Sugarcane continued to be grown in Louisiana. Through most of the South cotton still reigned. But whatever they grew and wherever they lived, most African Americans across the South worked, worshiped, rested, and partied around cycles of labor—the long hours required to plant, cultivate, and harvest a cash crop. And most operated within a system of land ownership and rental that varied considerably in its details but little in its basic framework.

By 1900, approximately one-fourth of all black Southerners who operated farms owned the soil they tilled. The number of black farm owners—and their total acreage—increased each year. Southern black leaders frequently pointed to these accomplishments as evidence of a strong work ethic among their people and of the great potential that lay in the rural South.

But the story was more complicated and less encouraging than the tale told by these statistics. Impressive increases in total acreage owned by black Southerners did testify to hard work and frugality. Many lived according to the work ethic later articulated by Alabama farmer Ned Cobb: "I didn't come in this world to rust out. If I need anything done in my field I ought to be there if time will admit it, on time. I got to work. I'm born to work."

In the opening decades of the twentieth century Cobb clawed his way up the ladder from

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wage laborer to sharecropper, cash renter, and finally owner. But he never was able to accumulate much, and more than once he was cheated out of his assets by white landlords or merchants. For him, as so many others, prosperity—even mere independence—remained a difficult goal to achieve and maintain.

These farms were small and seldom grew any larger. Moreover, even farmers who had not borrowed money to purchase their farms still needed some form of credit to meet a year's expenses before their crop could be harvested in the fall. Partly because the land worked by black farmers tended to be worth less than the crop that could be grown on it, local merchants and bankers would secure loans by taking a lien on the crop, guaranteeing they would have first rights to the sale of the crop, rather than a mortgage on the land. Instead of repossessing the land if a farmer failed to repay, the lender took what was due out of the sale of the crop. The farmer got what was left, and sometimes that was very little.

The holder of the lien could (and often did) require that the farmer put most of his fields into a cash crop in order to increase the likelihood of the farmer repaying his debt. Families who owned land thus had to purchase food that they otherwise might have grown themselves—and often from the same merchant who demanded that as a condition of their loan they plant most of their fields in cotton or tobacco.

With little money to invest, and working on land that was less productive than that available to renters, most black farm owners maintained an unstable grip on their independence. One or two years of bad weather or low prices for their crops could hurl them back into tenancy. The symbolic value of ownership, and the extent to which it permitted members of the family to go about their lives without thinking about a white landlord, could only multiply the pain of losing one's land.

The vast majority of black farmers rented their land, either as cash renters or sharecroppers. Most black tenants were sharecroppers, especially where cotton was the main crop. Because most sharecroppers had no source of money until the end of the year, they had to borrow—either from the landlord or from a local merchant—in order to meet normal family expenses. These loans (often called "furnish") would be repaid after "settlement." Settlement took place at the end of the year, when the landlord (or merchant) would compare the value of the tenant's portion of the crop with the sum "advanced" to the tenant during the preceding twelve months.

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Children provided an essential supplement to their parents when it came time to pick cotton. Schools for African-American children in the South closed when the bolls ripened.

Almost invariably the sharecropper came out either behind or barely even. Even the thousands of sharecroppers who were illiterate and therefore unable to challenge the accounting suspected that they seldom received their due. In 1919, for example, George Conway of Keo, Arkansas, raised twenty bales of cotton, worth thirty-five hundred dollars Although he knew that he had not purchased more than three hundred dollars worth of merchandise on credit from his landlord that year, he was told at settlement that he still owed forty dollars. His demand for an itemized accounting earned him only a beating. Still claiming a debt of forty dollars, the landlord seized Conway's household goods and drove him off the plantation.

The inevitability of the unfair settlement became a staple of African-American humor, with innumerable variations of a joke that has a tenant secretly withholding a bale or two of cotton at settlement time. As William Pickens, whose family sharecropped in South Carolina and Arkansas, later observed, "Who could deny it? The white man did all the reckoning. The Negro did all the work."

To complain or to threaten legal action was useless; no court would rule in favor of a black sharecropper against a white landlord. A sharecropper could carry over a debt into the next year; move to another farm with the debt built into the next contract; or quietly try to leave—to skip out on an obligation that most black Southerners considered a complete sham anyway.

Indeed the debt was even worse than a sham. By law the tenant was actually a wage laborer; the crop belonged to the landlord. But the landlord had it both ways. The sharecropper family worked, yet received no regular wages. They were paid nothing until the crop had been harvested and sold. Thus the landlord was actually the one who should have been considered the debtor. The cash—or wage—that was being withheld from the laborer was a debt, cash that the landlord owed the tenant but did not have to pay until December.

To satisfy the basic needs of their families, sharecroppers thus had to borrow at high interest

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rates, generally ranging from forty to seventy percent in an era when rates elsewhere generally fluctuated between four and eight percent. Even at these outrageous prices, sharecroppers could get credit to buy only what the landlord (or furnishing merchant) deemed appropriate.

Those basic needs were quite modest. The standard of living among black sharecroppers in the South was generally lower than that of mid-nineteenth-century westward pioneers. But where the pioneers' log cabins suggest to us images of upwardly mobile families clearing homesteads and carving out a living from the land, sharecroppers' log cabins represent a very different reality. These cabins, which could be constructed out of rough boards rather than logs, were dark, sometimes without windows. Where there were openings they generally lacked glass panes, and often even shutters. Screens were virtually unknown. Keeping the house clean, considered to be women's work, was virtually impossible.

With only three rooms or fewer, it was equally impossible to create specialized spaces for such activities as eating, sleeping, or memorizing one's school lessons. Several members of a family slept in a single room, with five or more not at all uncommon. At a time when middle- and upper-class Americans had come to expect divisions between "private" and "public" spaces in their homes, the tenant's cabin afforded no such luxury. There was no such thing as a room that had only one purpose or was the domain of a single family member.

For many sharecroppers, family life was different from that idealized by a "mainstream" middle-class family. Black families in the rural South resembled the two-parent households common elsewhere in the United States at the time, but were more likely to include older relatives as well. Perhaps the presence of other adults left husbands and fathers with less authority than their counterparts elsewhere. Many definitely had to share authority with their landlords, who drew contracts that permitted them to require family members to work the fields. Black men thus came to value their ability to relieve their wives and children of field work. Moreover, by controlling the furnish, a landlord could influence relations within a sharecropper's family by defining the range of purchasing options—how much of each kind of clothing, how many luxuries, or what kind of food.

The sharecropper's diet was dull and often sparse. A garden could yield plenty of food, but many landlords required their tenants to grow cotton almost to the door. The Delta Farm Company, owner of 35,000 acres of land in Mound Bayou County, Mississippi, for example, prohibited its tenants from raising anything other than cotton. No chickens or vegetables were permitted. Generally, tenants tended small gardens, supplemented by what they could afford at the local store. The result was a lot of cornmeal and poor cuts of pork, all prepared with generous quantities of animal fat—another challenge to women who increasingly were being told by agricultural reformers (black and white) to be better housewives by preparing more healthful food.

Indeed, the growing movements for better farming methods and more efficient rural housekeeping bore little relevance to the realities of sharecropping. There was no incentive for tenants or owners to improve either the farm or the dwelling. Landlords were steeped in a culture committed to an agricultural economy based on cheap labor. They also were steeped in a culture that assumed black people would have difficulty learning advanced farming methods or how to operate and maintain machinery. Landlords considered mules and cabins appropriate to the aptitudes and productivity of African Americans. A greater investment in equipment or

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living conditions, they thought, would neither raise the value of their property nor increase output. Moreover, the landlord would receive only a portion of any increased yield that might result from improvement.

On the tenant's side, improving the farm made even less sense. Why invest sweat or money into a home or farm that was owned by someone else? What little cash a family might accumulate was best spent in moveable items that could increase one's share of the crop next time around: a wagon, a mule, or a plow. And why accumulate household goods when in all likelihood the family would move within a few years? Little surprise that housekeeping technology seldom went far beyond water pail, washtub, and cooking kettle.

Having no investment in home or farm, and encountering constant frustration regardless of how hard they worked, sharecroppers were bound to remain alert to other possibilities. Although many families remained on a single farm for years, William Pickens's parents were more typical. By the time he had reached his nineteenth birthday in 1900, he had known more than twenty buildings that he could call "home."

At first they moved locally, from farm to farm within their rural South Carolina community. Their big chance seemed to strike in the late 1880s, when a visitor told them about Arkansas, where planters were clamoring for men to work land being brought under cultivation. The man was a "labor agent," one of many recruiters who in the late nineteenth century traveled through those parts of the South where years of growing cotton or tobacco had worn the land thin.

These agents worked for planters further south in Florida or—more frequently—further west in the Mississippi Delta or in Arkansas. With no prospects in South Carolina, Pickens's parents were prepared to listen. "The agent said that Arkansas was a tropical country of soft and balmy air, where coconuts, oranges, lemons, and bananas grew. Ordinary things like corn and cotton, with little cultivation, grew an enormous yield."

So they went. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, the system stabilized but people moved. The South's black population churned as rural people moved from plantation to plantation, county to county, state to state in quest of the holy grail of land ownership. Some, like the Pickenses, were lured by labor agents. Others, especially in hilly areas where whites already outnumbered blacks, were pushed out in a process known as "whitecapping," a term that referred to the practice of night riders pushing African Americans off their land through threat of violence. At least 239 instances of white-capping were recorded during the two decades beginning in the late 1880s, with Mississippi the most common site. The term seems to have originated in Indiana, where night riders invading a small community or threatening an individual African-American resident would wear white caps as part of their disguise.

Despite its origins in the Midwest, whitecapping was mainly a Southern rural phenomenon. Successful black farmers were the most likely target of this kind of eviction because of the common assumption among whites that the success of some blacks might unleash unrealistic (and dangerous) aspirations among the local black population. A farmer in Alpharetta, Georgia, recognized that he "better not accumulate much, no matter how hard and honest you work for it, as they—well, you can't enjoy it." In some cases, whole communities were forced from their homes.

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In areas more heavily populated by African Americans, especially the "Black Belt" stretching across the cotton-growing region of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and East Texas, nature took its toll as well. The boll weevil, which devoured cotton, entered the United States from Mexico toward the end of the nineteenth century.

Some landlords responded by diversifying their farms, especially after 1910, when the weevil's impact interacted with a growing agricultural reform movement. Corn required only one-fifth as much labor as cotton, which meant that many black tenants and wage hands were suddenly thrown out of work. In other cases black farmers confronted with a weevil-infested crop headed for areas rumored to be untouched, or abandoned farming altogether.

This constant movement vexed landlords, but it was virtually built into the system. Indeed, contrary to conventional opinion among whites, the proclivity to move had little to do with what whites called "Negro character." Black Southerners did move more frequently than whites, but mainly because they were more likely to be sharecroppers—the most mobile category of farmers. Among all sharecroppers in the early-twentieth-century South, African Americans had the lowest rates of mobility; black cash renters and owners were each more stable than their white counterparts.

Moving was, in fact, the American way. The movement of labor toward opportunity is essential to the efficient operation of labor markets in a growing economy. Free labor implies the ability of workers to move from depressed locales to areas of expansion, liberating both the worker to take advantage of opportunity and the employer from any responsibility for supporting former employees.

But the rural South, especially where cotton or sugar cultivation dominated patterns of employment, was committed to a different type of economy—one dominated by the plantation, a form of production that required a tightly controlled labor force. Except in areas where new lands were being brought into cultivation, a stable labor force seemed essential to both the prosperity of individual landowners and the stability of the system itself. Complaints about a "chaotic" labor market and "restless" and "unreliable" black labor abounded. White landowners lamented the inclination of their tenants to be "controlled far more by their fancies than by their common sense."

In response, nearly all Southern states, and many localities as well, attempted to immobilize black labor by erecting legal and economic barriers to movement. Although enmeshed in a capitalist economy based on the ability of the employer to purchase—and control—only the *labor* of workers, and not the workers themselves, Southern landlords insisted on their right to limit the ability of people they called "their negroes" to change employers.

Control over land and credit provided the basis for one set of barriers to mobility. Many landowners limited the amount of land they would rent to each tenant in order to ensure that the sharecropper would cultivate the land intensively. Moreover, tenants with small plots were less likely to earn enough to permit them to advance into the ranks of landowners.

The goal was to keep black Southerners as dependent as possible on white landowners and merchants. Where the sharecropper was not dependent he could be tied down by contract. In most Southern states a sharecropping contract differed from most other contracts in that it was enforceable in criminal rather than civil courts. A sharecropper who skipped out after planting

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a crop would not be sued (he was not likely to have any assets anyway), but arraigned on criminal charges.

What really mattered, however, was not whether a tenant remained on a particular farm so much as whether a locality's total labor force remained stable. Local movement was expected and tolerated. Indeed, local movement provided frustrated and discontented tenants with an apparent choice of options, a reason to hope that a new chance might yield a better crop and brighter future. What was crucial was to limit the threat to the local labor supply, to ensure that come picking time there would be enough black men, women, and children to drag heavy sacks through the fields.

Assuming (incorrectly) that long-distance movement was largely the result of smooth-tongued recruiters, Southern landlords and employers went to considerable lengths to curb the "labor agent menace." States and localities across the South put considerable effort into keeping "their negroes" ignorant of outside opportunities. In 1900 the United States Supreme Court for the first time upheld the constitutionality of the laws requiring labor agents to pay licensing fees that were so high as to make it impossible to legally entice away a community's black workers. A flood of legislation followed, as state and local governments determined to protect their labor force from recruiters.

Recruitment laws had little effect, however. They were extremely difficult to enforce. Even more important, they ignored the influence of informal networks across the black South that carried information—and misinformation—about opportunities in developing sections of the region. What really kept black Southerners in place kept them not in particular communities, but in the regional economy as a whole: There were few alternatives—at least for men—beyond seasonal farm work. As the *Pee Dee Watchman,* a South Carolina black newspaper, explained in 1917, since the end of Reconstruction in the 1870s, "thousands desired to leave but could find no haven, no place where the demand for negro labor was greater than the supply."

Moreover, within the rural economy opportunities existed for employment during the slack season. A cotton crop requires spurts of intense activity—preparing the field, planting, hoeing, and harvesting—punctuated by intervals of monitoring. These intervals permitted family members who did not have primary responsibility for a crop to seek other employment.

Turpentine camps, sawmills, cottonseed-oil mills, and other industries tied to the rural economy provided young men with opportunities to earn cash wages. Young women ventured into cities and towns to earn extra cash washing, cooking, or cleaning. In most cases these individuals moved back and forth between town (or less frequently, city) and farm, with the longest interval coming after picking in the late fall and before planting time in March.

Leaving the countryside permanently, however, was a more daunting matter, especially for men. The new, expanding industries of the early-twentieth-century South offered few opportunities to black workers. Textiles, furniture, oil and gas, paper, chemicals—each contributed to the growth of Southern cities and Southern factories, each was interested only in white people as machine tenders.

Skilled positions in such new urban sectors as electrical production and streetcar transportation remained equally off-limits, while at the same time white workers were

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displacing blacks from nineteenth-century footholds in the skilled construction trades. Black men could find jobs in coal mines and in the iron and steel mills in the area of Birmingham, Alabama. But these represented exceptions to the general pattern of casual employment known as "negro labor." The urban economy thus meshed effectively with the rural. The plantation needed a stable labor force that could find outlets during slack periods; town and city employers looked to black workers to fill temporary needs usually involving a shovel or a broom.

Black women, on the other hand, had little difficulty finding urban employment as long as they were willing to work for a pittance. Middle-and upper-class white southerners expected black women to do their domestic chores. Wages for domestic workers were so low that even many white workers considered the availability of black "help" a part of their birthright. In contrast to Northern cities, where black servants were part of a labor market that included a large component of white European immigrants, Southern households invariably employed African Americans. And in contrast to a widespread pattern of live-in service among those immigrants, black women generally insisted on living at home. "They seem to think that it is something against their freedom if they sleep where they are employed," observed one employer whose dismissal of this sentiment stands in stark contrast to its accuracy. Nevertheless, in addition to a customary twelve-to fourteen-hour day, black women domestic workers often had to respond to demands for extra hours.

The servant's day was not only long, it was physically and emotionally difficult. Only servants for the wealthiest families could specialize as cook or nurse. "I'm looking for a nurse for my children," usually implied cleaning, cooking, and serving as well. That nurse also had to fight for her dignity in a household where as one woman noted, "The child I work for calls me girl." The man of the house could (and often did) present a very different kind of threat to a servant's dignity—pressure for sexual favors. One servant explained that she lost a job when "I refused to let the madam's husband kiss me. … He walked up to me, threw his arms around me, and was in the act of kissing me, when I demanded to know what he meant, and shoved him away." When the black woman's husband filed a complaint against her employer, he was arrested and fined twenty-five dollars.

Resistance to the regimen and the disrespect, however, was often more subtle than a generally useless formal complaint. Taking advantage of whites' assumptions about black women's carelessness, servants would appear to be careless. A hot iron purposely left too long on a garment could provide a fitting revenge against an employer who refused to permit a servant to take a quick trip home to visit her own children. Similarly, servants would invent holidays that their employers would grudgingly acknowledge. Whites chalked the festival up to "negro character" (they would never have used the word "culture")—something which they could never understand and felt was not worth figuring out anyway.

A woman who wanted a little more control over her time, especially to take care of her own family, would clean other people's clothes rather than their homes. The work was hard, and only slightly more remunerative than domestic service. And taking in laundry carried risks: One ruined or lost garment could bring a refusal to pay for a whole load. Like the sharecroppers whose landlord refused to pay a proper settlement, a laundress had no recourse to the courts when a dispute arose. Remarkably, washerwomen and domestics did strike, in

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some cases maintaining considerable solidarity. But the deck was stacked against any permanent shift in the balance of power between these women and their employers. Most women even preferred picking cotton to domestic work (it paid better), and white women in towns and cities across the "cotton belt" complained—or raised wages—when ripening cotton bolls attracted their servants to the countryside.

Residents of towns and cities were unlikely to find the countryside unfamiliar. Many had come from farms in the first place. Moreover, black urban neighborhoods in the South showed little evidence of the outpouring of services undertaken by cities of this era. African Americans generally lived on unpaved streets where such standard urban services as police, fire protection, garbage collection, and sewers were rare. As late as the mid-1920s Monroe Work, director of research at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, could describe most of the Southern urban black population as living under "country conditions … just beyond the zones for water, lights, and other conveniences." Infant mortality was high, as were stillbirths. In this, as in so many other ways, the black South remained a rural world even as the proportion living in cities rose gradually from fifteen percent in 1890 to twenty-one percent twenty years later.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, cotton cultivation still employed more black Southerners than any other single activity. Men awoke at dawn and headed to the fields. Women awoke even earlier to prepare breakfast—sometimes eaten in the cabin and sometimes in the fields, where women often worked alongside their husbands. The two major slack periods in the cotton cycle—July and August, when the weeds had been hoed and the plants could be left with minimal attention, and the last two months of the year, after the cotton bolls had been picked—provided rural black Southerners with opportunities for leisure.

The first of these periods coincided with food harvests. Barbecues, religious revivals, and other community gatherings were common summer activities. The later months followed "settlement"; what little cash was realized from a year's labor could be devoted to generally secular Christmas celebrations, shopping either in town or from a mail-order catalog, and contemplating a change of scenery. Well into the 1920s, the rhythms of the black South synchronized with the patterns of cotton cultivation.

The black North and West, on the other hand, were distinctly urban. Cities housed seventy percent of all black Northerners and sixty-seven percent of black Westerners at the turn of the century. By 1910 the urbanized portion of the black population in both regions was close to eighty percent. As they did in the South, women were most likely to find work as domestic servants. Men occasionally had access to industrial jobs, but usually only as temporary strikebreakers replacing white unionists.

A small business class, complemented by an even smaller group of professionals, constituted the upper class in these communities. Craftsmen had difficulties finding employment, especially in cities with strong unions in the building trades, which generally excluded African-American workmen. In some cities, most notably on the West Coast, black men in such occupations as hotel waiters and bellmen were losing their jobs to immigrants from abroad. For most men, the tools of the trade all too often remained the familiar shovel, broom, or mop.

In many cities these workers lived in all or mostly black areas. In the largest cities, such as

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New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, ghettos already had begun to emerge. But even where African Americans lived in racially mixed neighborhoods the trend was toward increased segregation. Blacks generally did not have access to housing elsewhere in the city, even if they earned enough to be more selective. Newcomers were immediately steered to districts known as “Little Africa” or the “Black Belt.” African Americans who managed to circumvent efforts by real estate agents to keep blacks out of “white” areas were met with bombings or personal threats.

Black communities were diverse and included small business and professional classes. The middle class also included certain service workers. In Chicago, one of the most important judges of social standing in the black community was Julius Avendorph, whose job as personal assistant to businessman George Pullman entailed duties generally performed by a valet or a messenger. Only slightly further down the ladder stood the Pullman porters, men who worked the railroad sleeping and dining cars operated by Pullman’s company. Their high status resulted in part from their relatively high job security and because many of them had high school—and in some cases even college—education.

Unlike their white counterparts, however, the black middle class—and even the minuscule black upper class—could not take advantage of the new housing available along transportation lines emerging from the city center. In a period when American cities were becoming increasingly segregated by class, African Americans remained residentially segregated by race instead.

The “White Problem”

James Weldon Johnson remembered well his introduction to the full implications of what it meant to be a black man in the United States. As a student at Atlanta University in the 1890s he recognized that “education for me meant, fundamentally, preparation to meet the tasks and exigencies of life as a Negro, a realization of the peculiar responsibilities due to my own racial group, and a comprehension of the application of American democracy to Negro citizens.” The future songwriter, diplomat, writer, and civil rights leader did not learn this in the classroom; rather, he learned it on campus and around town.

Johnson, of course, already knew that he was “a Negro,” and that race mattered. He had grown up in Jacksonville, Florida, after the overthrow of Reconstruction. Although his family was better off than most African Americans (his father was a headwaiter at a hotel, his mother, a teacher), they experienced the same exclusions, acts of discrimination, and affronts to their dignity that other black Southerners suffered as white Southerners began to reestablish white supremacy. The task for black Southerners was to teach their children how to accommodate the system without accepting either the system or their place in it as natural, just, or inevitable.

In the North things were not entirely different; they simply carried a different twist. W. E. B. Du Bois described a social snub he received in the 1860s in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, at the tender age of six:

> Something put it into the boys’ and girls’ heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned on me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like,

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mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.

One had to learn where the color line was, what it meant, how and when to cross it, and how to maintain one's self-respect when it could not be crossed. Thousands of African Americans would spend a good part of their lives trying to destroy that line.

By the 1890s a new generation of African Americans was reaching adulthood. These young men and women had never experienced slavery. They had experienced the violent overthrow of Reconstruction only as children. Unaccustomed to timidity toward whites and without vivid memories of the disillusion and despair following Reconstruction, they did not readily settle in places defined by the racial etiquette that had emerged during the previous two decades. This was especially true in cities and towns, where black populations were increasing despite the lack of regular employment for black men.

In an era when white Southerners were writing, reading, and reminiscing about a mythical antebellum South characterized by harmony between the races brought by slavery, these seemingly rootless young African Americans could seem threatening indeed. "The negroes are being overbearing and need toning down," declared one Louisiana newspaper in 1896.

Most white Southerners continued to believe that the descendants of Africans remained at a lower stage of civilization than Europeans and their descendants. In the early twentieth century, Southern historian Ulrich B. Phillips would describe the slave plantation as a school, and most white Southerners were certain that emancipation had freed a people who had been dismissed from the school of slavery too early. Black people who did not know their place, did not acknowledge their subordinate status, and did not recognize the folly of trying to reach too high were considered dangerous.

This notion of one's "place" was central to the role of African Americans in Southern life. Place referred partly to where "the Negro" could fit in the Southern economy: mainly in agriculture. Blacks were to grow the cotton. Jobs in the industries processing the cotton into cloth were generally reserved for whites. Where the "Negro's place" was not agricultural, it was servile.

Place also referred to the location of African Americans in Southern culture, a subordinate role that was enacted and reenacted on the street, in the store, and elsewhere in the daily lives of Southerners.

The prevailing ideas about race, coupled with the inheritance of the plantation economy, contributed to the development of a legal system that left blacks peculiarly vulnerable to domination by their employers and landlords. "What could we do?" declared a black Georgian forced to work without pay to settle a fraudulent debt. "The white folks had all the courts, all the guns, all the hounds, all the railroads, all the telegraph wires, all the newspapers, all the money, and nearly all the land."

A white attorney in Mississippi explained in 1914 (six years before taking office as a judge) that "an important branch of the law here in Mississippi" was "Negro law." This law was unwritten, and at its center was the premise of African-American powerlessness.

Given how easy it was for white landlords and employers to call the shots, they considered it essential that African Americans remain in the South at the bottom of the heap—available for

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work that nobody else would do. Any education black Southerners received should not, as one Southern governor put it, give them aspirations "beyond the sphere of negro life."

The concern with blacks not accepting their place reveals a lasting tension within Southern white culture. On the one hand, early-twentieth-century white Southerners tended to be confident that their black workers, tenants, and servants were "amiable." African Americans thus constituted the perfect labor force: easily coerced, unlikely to organize, and readily available because they supposedly lacked the ambition and aptitude to do anything else.

Existing side by side with this confidence, however, was a set of fears. Those whites who saw blacks as a race teetering on the edge of barbarism worried about the aggressions lurking beneath the thin veneer of amiability. Moreover, white Southerners either remembered Reconstruction or had grown up hearing the recollections of their parents—recollections enveloped in myths of evil white Northerners bent on revenge and profit and allied with illiterate black legislators intent on legalizing racial intermarriage.

These memories were furthered poisoned by the myths of corruption and incompetence that hid the accomplishments of the relatively rational, clean, and progressive state governments of the Reconstruction period. But they also included accurate images of black men voting, carrying guns, and taking their landlords to court. The danger of black political participation was clear to white Southerners who wished to learn from history rather than repeat it.

White Southerners had perfectly good reason to fear that African Americans did not accept things the way they were. Black men were moving around more, finding employment in the expanding seasonal turpentine and lumber industries. Less tied to the land than their parents, young African Americans were increasingly moving to the city, especially after the depression of the 1890s sent cotton prices cascading downward. Women were welcomed as domestics but men had no settled place in the urban economy. Strikes by black domestic workers, longshoremen, lumber workers, and railroad men were unusual events, but point to an increased unwillingness among black workers to accept their place.

Black men and women were also determined to become educated. Between 1870 and 1910, the literacy rate among black Southerners increased from nineteen percent to sixty-one percent.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, many white Southerners were growing increasingly concerned that their black neighbors, employees, servants, and tenants would not accept their place. It seemed that protocol and custom no longer held behavior in check. Even intimidation required more effort.

In cities reports of blacks resisting arrest had been on the rise since the late 1880s. Complaining of black servants referring to one another as "Miss Johnson" or "Mr. Jones," one Louisiana newspaper identified the nub of the issue: "The younger generation of negro bucks and wenches have lost that wholesome respect for the white man, without which two races, the one inferior, cannot live in peace and harmony together."

To some white Southerners the answer to this apparent threat to white supremacy lay in increased levels of intimidation. The result was an epidemic of lynching in the South, beginning in 1882 and rising to a peak a decade later.

But lynching was a disorderly way to go about maintaining order. Southern white elites—men who published newspapers, owned plantations, sat on the boards of banks and railroads,

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and pulled strings behind the scenes in the Democratic party—recognized that violence outside the legal system undermined the majesty of the law. Politically, however, it was unwise to condemn lynching more forcefully than a gentle chiding after each grisly murder of an African American. Lynchings, after all, were community events, festivals that parents attended with small children, holding them high in the air to afford a better view of the victim twisting in a noose or burning at the stake.

Lynchings were not only disorderly. They also gave the region bad press in the North. This was the early heyday of "yellow journalism," a new kind of newspaper publishing that attracted readers by appealing largely to their emotions. Lurid tales of Southern violence provided good copy, especially when tinged either with accusations of sexual violence or with a crowd's determination to cut off a victim's sexual organs. White Northerners, drawing on a long tradition of satisfying their consciences by expressing sympathy to black victims of Southern racism, seized on vivid descriptions of lynchings as continued evidence of Southern backwardness.

A twin lynching in Marian, Indiana, on August 8, 1930. The Ku Klux Klan had moved to the urban North and West during the 1920s and gained its greatest influence in Indiana.

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These twin threats posed by lynching—disregard for legal procedures and the possibility of federal intervention generated by outrage from the North—roused the Southern white establishment. White disorder had to be curbed, a task that required eliminating the instability

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and uncertainty in race relations that underlay that disorder. Blacks had to be kept in their place by other means. Across the South, state constitutions, state legislation, and city ordinances were rewritten to enshrine in law the subordinate place of black people in Southern life. Black male Southerners would no longer vote or serve on juries. Separation of the races would be required by law.

Poll taxes, property and literacy qualifications for voting, and the institution of the "white primary" were effective measures. In Mississippi, the president of the 1890 constitutional convention straightforwardly declared that "we came here to exclude the Negro," and the delegates did their job. Only black men who were economically independent or regarded by whites as "good" or "safe" Negroes remained on the voter rolls. By the turn of the century, only 10 percent of black men in Mississippi were registered to vote. Forty years later that proportion had dwindled to 0.4 percent (2,000 registered voters out of approximately 500,000 possible voters). Among Alabama's 181,471 African American men of voting age in 1900, only 3,000 were registered to vote. Across the South, the proportions were similar, and black voting remained insignificant until the 1960s.

Disfranchisement, or the stripping of people's right to vote, was an attack not only on black political influence—of which there was precious little by the turn of the century—but also on black manhood. Nineteenth-century Americans tied manhood and citizenship closely together. Both hinged on independence. Cast as naturally docile, unable to control their sexual passions, and economically dependent, black men were labeled as unfit for citizenship. Denying them the ballot reinforced their exclusion from the civic community.

The logical next step was to minimize disorder by minimizing contact between the races. Between 1890 and 1915, legislators across the South, as far west as Texas and Oklahoma, enacted Jim Crow laws that ensured, regardless of how interdependent the races might be in the South, they would not inhabit the same public spaces. In the most ordinary and yet meaningful way African Americans in the South would constantly be reminded—especially in cities and towns—that they were people without social honor, people whose dignity had no official existence, people who were not a part of mainstream society.

In most cases the trains and railroad stations were the first targets of Jim Crow laws. One waiting room was marked "colored," the other "white." Next, rules of conduct were passed for streetcars—whites were seated from front to back, blacks from back to front. Some streetcar companies considered this a foolish business practice, expensive and needlessly antagonizing their large black clientele. But the laws required segregation. For the races to sit alongside each other was to imply equality; front to back versus back to front reminded one and all who belonged in front and who belonged in the back.

The legislation quickly extended to nearly all aspects of public life. Anything worth doing or building outside people's homes was worth a segregation ordinance: hotels, restaurants, restrooms, drinking fountains, parks, schools, libraries, saloons, telephone booths, theaters, doorways, stairways, prisons, cemeteries, and brothels. In some communities the ordinances even specified the size of the ubiquitous "whites only" or "colored" signs. Florida required separate storage facilities for school textbooks. In Georgia, courtrooms had two Bibles for swearing in witnesses.

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This obsession with race, which reached its apex in the first decade of the twentieth century, was not unique to the South. Throughout the United States, the concept of race had become an increasingly important way of categorizing people and cultures. World atlases published during this period were less interested in economies or social systems than in the particular races inhabiting one place or another. Relying on the dominant theories in the social and physical sciences, powerful decision makers in government and industry divided the American population into a staggering array of "races": Armenians, Gypsies, Ruthenians, Jews, Syrians, Greeks, Italians, Africans. Each was a separate race, and each had its own distinct characteristics.

Northern industrialists devised hiring policies reminiscent of eighteenth-century Southern slaveholders who had been certain that Africans from one area made better slaves than men and women from another part of the continent. Thus Poles and Slavs were presumed to be suited to tasks requiring great physical exertion; Jews, Italians, and Portuguese supposedly had an aptitude for lighter, repetitive tasks that required a keen eye or nimble finger. Italians were unstable and untidy "but not destructive," noted one Milwaukee industrialist, who lamented that they drank too much (though less than the Greeks), quarreled, and did not understand modern machinery. Hungarians, although "thrifty and honest" in the view of another employer, were not clean. In most variations of this complex scheme, "Africans" were considered inefficient, incapable of mechanical labor, emotional rather than rational, oversexed, and in general a cut below everyone else.

The South differed from the rest of the country in the relative simplicity of its racial roster. There race remained largely a question of black and white. White Northerners and Westerners, although equally inclined to think in racial terms, were less likely than their Southern counterparts to translate those ideas into a system of rigid distinctions embodied in the law. They shared white Southerners' assumptions about the capabilities of the descendants of Africans, but the diversity of the population in these regions complicated the equation.

In the West, "Asiatic races," especially the Chinese, seemed a more threatening presence than the small black population. There was, of course, considerable variation. James Weldon Johnson, a performer traveling with his brother in 1905, could secure no hotel accommodations in Salt Lake City. They had considerable difficulty even finding a place to eat. A few days later in San Francisco they easily secured a room and dined without incident. Yet even in San Francisco patterns were uneven. The manager of a leading hotel there explained at the turn of the century that incidents seldom occurred, largely because "the colored people who travel… do not often place themselves or us in embarrassing positions."

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At the peak of its power in the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan marches down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., in 1926. Its members hid behind masks and robes as they terrorized black citizens. Catholics and Jews also attracted Klan hatred during the 1920s.

In the North, race was complicated by the multiplicity of European nationalities. Blacks were not essential to the labor market. Their ability to vote generally aroused little concern because their numbers were relatively small until the 1920s. Few whites considered their presence a threat to social stability. This would begin to change in the 1920s, as social theories increasingly reduced “race” to a triad of black/white/yellow (with American Indians either a fourth race or thrown in as descendants of Asians), and as a growing black population came to play a major role in urban culture and politics. Until the First World War, however, “race” as a division between two groups was largely a Southern way of thinking.

Because most Southern states by the first decade of the century had passed laws governing race and social interaction from marriage to public transportation to circus entrances and exits, it was essential to create usable definitions. How did one decide who was “a Negro”? Skin tones, after all, could suggest only so much in a society in which Africans, Europeans, and Indians—none of whom were uniformly tinted to begin with—had mingled over the centuries.

In New Orleans, for example, the population was considerably more diverse than elsewhere in the South. Because of a long history of sexual relations between people of European and African descent, skin hues ranged infinitely. A streetcar official explained why the new segregation law required clear, if arbitrary, definitions: “Our conductors are men of intelligence, but the greatest ethnologist the world ever saw would be at a loss to classify streetcar passengers in this city.”

Apparently the only possible solution was to “eyeball” passengers and rely on conventional assumptions about the physical characteristics that distinguished “black” from “white.” Indeed, this was the approach of the United States Bureau of the Census, which instructed its enumerators until 1920 to categorize an individual by estimating the proportion of African

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blood according to color and other features.

This might work for the census, but racially segregated institutions needed more exact ways of determining inclusion and exclusion. The color line had to be defined to regulate such important civic activities as school enrollments, marriage, and jury service. A question with serious social implications everywhere in the United States also had wide-ranging legal implications in the South.

Southern states divided roughly equally in how their laws defined race. Approximately half defined "a Negro" as anyone with "a trace of black ancestry." Nearly all the rest identified anyone with at least one-eighth "Negro blood" (one great-grandparent) as "colored." Yet this solution to the problem of categorization was neither inevitable nor "natural." Why should a child with one parent of European descent and one parent of African descent be a "Negro"? How much genealogical research was to be required to define someone's legal status?

Elsewhere in the Western hemisphere, societies used a broad variety of categories. Even in the United States the terms *mulatto* (half and half), *quadroon* (three white grandparents, one black), and *octoroon* (one black great-grandparent, seven white) were frequently used, both in popular speech and even (at least in the case of "mulatto") in the United States Census until 1920. Indeed, the decision to drop "mulatto" as a category that year resulted from bureau estimates that seventy-five percent of all African Americans were of "mixed blood," and eyeballing the difference between "Negroes" and "mulattoes" was impossible. Anyway, the only categories that mattered were those required by the Southern laws. "One drop" of Negro blood sullied the purity of whiteness, pushing an individual across the color line.

The legal existence and meaning of these categories was ratified by the United States Supreme Court in 1896, when it ruled in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* that state laws requiring racially segregated facilities were permissible under the Constitution as long as the facilities were "equal." They never were. But it would take nearly sixty years for American law to recognize that inequality. Not until 1954 would the Supreme Court begin dismantling Jim Crow by ruling in *Brown* v. *Board of Education* that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

Building Communities

The Independent Order of St. Luke was in trouble. Founded in Maryland in 1867 to provide sickness and death benefits to dues-paying members, the order had flourished for two decades, rapidly expanding to New York and Virginia. But in 1899, in part because of the deepest economic depression the nation had yet experienced, the organization was virtually bankrupt. After thirty years in office its chief executive resigned, leaving his successor $31.61 in cash and $400 in debts.

The new Grand Worthy Secretary, Maggie Lena Walker, assumed her position at a fraction of her predecessor's salary. Under her leadership the Order of St. Luke not only survived but flourished. From 57 councils with 1,080 members, it grew to 2,020 councils with more than 100,000 members in 28 states. Guided by Walker's commitment to expanding economic opportunities for African Americans, the order established programs for black youth, an

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educational loan fund, a weekly newspaper, a department store, and a bank. Walker and her colleagues in St. Luke led a boycott against segregated streetcars in Richmond, Virginia, in 1904. The *St. Luke Herald*, the organization's paper, took positions opposing segregation, lynching, and discrimination against black job seekers.

Maggie Lena Walker was the first woman in the United States to serve as president of a bank. Born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1867, Walker graduated from that city's Colored Normal School (a teachers' college) sixteen years later. By then she already had shared the work experience of most urban African-American women, helping her widowed mother with child care and with the laundry taken in to make ends meet. Her degree qualified her to teach in Richmond's segregated black schools, but she was forced to resign when she married.

Walker had joined the Independent Order of St. Luke when she was fourteen and by 1899 had held numerous leadership positions in the organization. During the next three decades she would supplement her leadership of the Order of St. Luke with active involvement in the woman suffrage movement, Richmond Council of Colored Women, Virginia State Federation of Colored Women, National Association of Wage Earners, International Council of Women of the Darker Races, National Training School for Girls, Richmond Urban League, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Maggie Lena Walker's career suggests both the challenges faced by African-American communities in the early twentieth century and the diversity of initiatives fashioned by black leadership to meet those challenges. Although she was speaking of women in particular, Walker effectively described where African Americans as a group stood and where they had to go: "To avoid the traps and snares of life," they would have to "band themselves together, organize … put their mites together, put their hands and their brains together and make work and business for themselves."

Walker was calling for what her biographer has termed a "community of struggle." This community could be diverse, encompassing men, women, and children; businesspeople and domestic servants; preachers and sinners. It also could accommodate differences of opinion. But to be a community capable of moving forward it would have to encompass a people aware of their common past and shared future. The long agenda suggested by Walker's career meant that no single approach, no focus on any single organization, could define African-American leadership or purpose.

For African Americans in the early twentieth century this struggle had two related and mutually supportive components. One was to build community institutions such as schools, churches, businesses, clubs, and lodges within the African-American world. The other was to fight for integration into American institutional life, to integrate schools, workplaces, residential neighborhoods, public accommodations like hotels and restaurants, and especially councils of government. Even today these goals are often presented as alternatives, warring strategies competing for the loyalty of people forced to choose one path or the other.

Presenting these alternatives as a harsh choice is misleading. Although particular leaders and institutions did express competing visions and emphases, activism took place simultaneously at many levels. When rural black Southerners banded together to build a school, they were engaging in self-help while at the same time yielding to segregation. But they

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also were resisting white assumptions about the appropriate form of education for their children. They were insisting on a literacy that defied Southern white definitions of their "place." To build a school was to participate in the struggle for equality.

Yet the quest for integration did not always reflect a desire to mix with white people. Despite the ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that separate institutions were constitutional only if they were equal, African Americans recognized that in practice separate always meant unequal. Thus blacks frequently fought for integration into white institutions in order to gain access to better services or commodities. By living among whites, a Los Angeles journalist observed, black Californians could secure "the best fire, water, and police protection."

Robert and Mary Church Terrell made the same judgment in Washington, D.C. As the first president of the National Association of Colored Women, Mary Terrell was one of the most prominent women in the United States. Robert Terrell was an attorney and eventually a federal judge. They did not necessarily want to live among white neighbors, she later recalled of their search for a house. But housing in "white" neighborhoods was "more modern" (in other words, better equipped and in better condition). It also was less expensive. Real estate agents selling homes in "Negro" neighborhoods could price properties higher because African Americans had access to only a small portion of the city's housing market. For the Terrells and others, the struggle for integration did reflect sentiment for increased contact across the color line. But even many integrationists were wary of whites, seeking integration only because the color line divided the powerful from the powerless.

Whether building community institutions or battering the walls of racial separation and discrimination, African Americans had to mobilize limited resources. These resources included a long history—dating from slavery—of community life built on families and religion. In the rural South the other major institution to emerge after emancipation was the school. In towns and cities these institutions joined with women's clubs, fraternal societies, businesses, and social service organizations to shape African-American community life and provide the basis for activism.

Other than the family, the oldest African-American institution was the church. By the beginning of the twentieth century the church brought together African Americans as no other institution possibly could. In 1906 more than half of the nearly seven million African Americans ten years or older belonged to churches, a proportion comparable to patterns among white Americans. Much more striking is the number of African Americans united in a few particular organizations. The National Baptist Convention, the largest black institution in the United States, claimed more than 2.2 million members. The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church constituted the second largest denomination, with nearly 500,000 members.

Like most white Southerners, African-American Christians tended to be fundamentalists, men and women who read their Bibles literally and worshiped energetically. Especially in the rural South and in working-class urban churches, black Americans demanded that their ministers evoke emotional responses with powerful sermons. A pastor's ability to "shout" his congregation (to arouse a vocal expression of passion during the sermon) measured his leadership as well as his spiritual credentials.

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The greatest heights of ecstasy were often reached in Holiness and Pentecostal churches, which emphasized the importance of a worshiper's personal experience with the Holy Spirit. At first attracting both black and white Southerners, Holiness and Pentecostal sects grew most rapidly after 1910. Subsequently, as Southerners moved north and west these sects expanded, especially into the urban Midwest.

African-American churches were not, however, merely places where people went for relief from the burdens of everyday life. "The social life of the Negro centres in his church," W. E. B. Du Bois observed in his 1899 study, *The Philadelphia Negro*. "Baptism, wedding and burial, gossip and courtship, friendship and intrigue—all lie within these walls." Many ministers and deacons (lay leaders) complemented their inspirational roles with political activity, or served as community spokesmen. In middle-class churches, where emotional behavior was rejected as "undecorous," a pastor might provide intellectual leadership as well.

In rural areas and small towns, churches often were the only gathering places available outside of small business establishments. People would come together in the church to discuss building a school or respond to a threatened lynching. They would share information and opinions about migration to the new "black towns" being established in Oklahoma, to agricultural areas touted by labor agents, or to Northern cities.

Although Southern cities had other gathering places, churches still functioned as one of the most important community institutions. Social services and emergency support were especially common because so many black Southerners could secure only irregular employment. A strong sense of extended family helped, providing a network of support during periods of unemployment. Beyond the family lay the church, whose members gave freely when they could and received without shame when in need.

In Atlanta, most black churches took an "after collection" each Sunday, to be distributed to members in financial distress. Fifth Street Baptist in Louisville collected and distributed clothing, paid for funerals of members unable to afford proper burial, awarded an annual college scholarship, and held annual fundraising drives for an orphanage, a home for the elderly, and a local black college.

Northern churches were likely to add to this traditional form of charity with programs influenced by early-twentieth-century progressive reform movements. Under the leadership of Reverend Reverdy Ransom, the Institutional AME Church in Chicago resembled a settlement house, providing a wide variety of social services to the neighborhood. After finding a job through Institutional's employment bureau, a black worker could leave her child at its kindergarten or day nursery. Classes in sewing, cooking, stenography, and typing taught useful skills. Leisure opportunities included concerts, lectures, a reading room, and a gymnasium.

More typical in its less ambitious program was Antioch Baptist Church in Cleveland, which sponsored boys' and girls' clubs, choral groups, and a recreation center located in two adjacent houses. Destitute members received cash assistance. North and South, black churches and denominational associations published newspapers, provided social welfare services, helped congregants find jobs, and provided recreational facilities.

These activities required time and money. In most black churches the greatest energy came from the volunteer labor of the women who raised money from communities that had little cash

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to spare. The role of women as church activists was particularly evident in the National Baptist Convention, where they constituted two-thirds of the membership. In 1906, forty-three percent of all female African Americans who had reached their tenth birthday belonged to the National Baptist Convention. Men, however, dominated the organization's leadership, occupied the pulpits, and controlled the finances.

Just as African Americans in general looked to the church as an institution independent of white domination, black women determined that they needed an organization within the church that would provide them with a similar degree of independence. Founded in 1900, the Woman's Convention of the National Baptist Convention quickly grew to one million members, providing many women with their introduction to community activism.

This experience in local churches and in the Women's Convention brought many black women into the emerging women's club movement. The National Association of Colored Women grew quickly, from five thousand members in the late 1890s to fifty thousand in the 1910s and one hundred thousand a decade later.

Membership in the NACW came mainly from the urban elite—generally teachers and wives of professionals, ministers, and businessmen. These women shared with their white peers a concern with upholding traditional standards of morality and respectability amid the turmoil of movement from country to city and changes in employment from farm to factory. And, like black men, they organized to challenge the increasing level of racism at the turn of the century.

Black clubwomen recognized that their destiny was inextricably intertwined with less-privileged African Americans. If they could elevate other black women to their standards of morality and manners, then the black masses would be lifted up from the gutter of poverty and degradation. At the same time they would win from white America the acceptance they deserved by dint of their middle-class values and position.

Although the NACW did achieve recognition as an affiliate of the largely white National Council of Women in 1901, black women generally encountered difficulties with major women's reform organizations at the turn of the century. As the suffrage, temperance, and women's club movements moved toward national organization, they had to consider the sensibilities of white Southerners.

The urge to participate in "white" clubs and in "white" feminist organizations did not necessarily signal a desire to turn away from the black community toward a largely white social environment. White women who worried that black women seeking to join their suffrage organizations or the Women's Christian Temperance Union sought "social equality" deluded themselves. Black women simply recognized that these larger, more broadly based organizations could provide stronger backing and more visible platforms.

Indeed, like other black institutions, black women's clubs and reform societies owed their existence only partly to exclusion from white institutions. Black communities faced problems different from those confronted by white reformers. Like their white counterparts, NACW affiliates sponsored kindergartens, day nurseries, training schools, orphanages, and clubs for mothers. But they did so in response to a community with unique needs and limited resources.

Black women's clubs represented a type of institution whose roots lay in African-American fraternal societies (lodges) and mutual benefit associations. The distinctions between the two

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kinds of voluntary organizations were not always clear. Generally lodges were places for recreation for their members, and membership in a lodge was considered a badge of social respectability. Mutual benefit associations, by contrast, were likely to focus more on insurance functions, especially death benefits.

By the end of the century, these organizations had increasing overlapping functions. Nearly all provided members with burial and life insurance. Some, like the Independent Order of St. Luke, which was unusual in that it included both men and women, operated small businesses or banks. Nearly all provided opportunities for leadership.

Membership in a fraternal order could provide African-American men with a badge of respectable manhood within the community. A black man denied civic recognition in the Jim Crow South was somebody when he wore the uniform of the Elks, Knights of Pythias, Masons, Oddfellows, or any one of a number of other lodges. The largest order was the Oddfellows, with more than 300,000 members by 1904.

North and South, fraternal and sororital organizations were an integral aspect of urban culture among the mass of working-class black men and women. In the North, lodge membership provided men with political connections and stature. Robert R. Jackson, who was elected to the Illinois legislature in 1912 and was a major player in Chicago politics for two decades, belonged to approximately twenty-five fraternal orders.

There was no clear line between clubs and fraternal societies. But clubs were more likely to be exclusive and perhaps have reform or political orientations; fraternal societies were more likely to be national organizations with broad memberships. Fraternal societies were also more likely to perform business functions. Like the Order of St. Luke, most lodges took their burial and life insurance functions seriously. The first African-American insurance companies grew out of these and similar activities among church-related mutual benefit societies. Because companies controlled by whites charged blacks higher premiums—supposedly because they had higher mortality rates—black companies had a ready market for their products. So did African-American banks, since white banks seldom solicited business in the black community. Significantly, black banking and insurance companies first developed in the South, where black communities were larger and the color line was clearest.

The most dramatic example of how fraternal orders could evolve into financial institutions can be seen in the history of the Grand United Order of the True Reformers. William Washington Browne, an ex-slave and Union Army veteran, founded the organization in Richmond, Virginia, in 1881, with the intertwined goals of building a business and advancing the race. Secret ritual, regalia, a grand annual convention with a colorful parade: Each provided members with opportunities for camaraderie and ceremony within an organization also dedicated to community service. At the same time, Browne's wife found a way to earn profits with a regalia factory that she established in the True Reformers' building.

From the beginning the order's mission included mutual benefit activities. The insurance business grew so rapidly that by 1888 Browne saw an opportunity in the need to deposit and invest the cash it generated. By the turn of the century, the True Reformers counted 100,000 members and had expanded into real estate, printing, and undertaking in addition to operating an old-age home and a hotel. All catered to a black clientele.

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North and South, there was a noticeable rise in black business enterprise at the beginning of the twentieth century. To a considerable extent this bustling business activity was the result of the increasing segregation of African Americans into urban ghettos. But it also was part of a broader change in the social and economic life of urban black America.

In the nineteenth century black businessmen and even professionals had enjoyed a small white clientele in many cities. These men constituted an elite, an "upper crust," within their communities. Their social networks were generally distinct from those of other African Americans. In many cities, especially in the North, they worshiped at black churches (or in a few cases even predominantly white churches) affiliated with "white" denominations: Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Congregationalists. This group would remain the "upper crust" of black America, but by the turn of the century it was giving way to a new business and professional class, men and women who made their living serving an African-American clientele.

This transition in community leadership was personified in the career of John Merrick, a former slave who accumulated savings as a barber and owner of six barbershops in Durham, North Carolina. Merrick also sold insurance for the True Reformers. His prosperity, however, was due in large part to the stability and status provided by his position as personal barber to the white tobacco magnate James Buchanan Duke. He parlayed this stake into a much larger fortune during the first decade of the twentieth century, when he drew on his experience with the True Reformers to join with two other African-American entrepreneurs to form the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company.

Southern cities like Durham led the way in the growth of an African-American business class catering to African-American consumers. The largest enterprises were insurance companies and banks, but small shops were the most common form of black enterprise. What mattered to the mainly black clientele was how they were treated—with respect and in a businesslike fashion. A woman could not try on a hat in a Southern downtown store; once it sat on her head it was a "Negro hat" (or worse, a "nigger hat") that the white shop owner could not in good conscience sell to a white customer. At the pharmacy a black druggist did not expect his customers to bow and scrape, or to stand aside until all the white customers were served.

Making a virtue out of necessity, many influential black Southerners declared that the race's future lay in a "group economy." Black businesses catering to black customers would employ black men and women, creating a racial self-sufficiency rather than the individual self-sufficiency envisioned by so many rural black Southerners since emancipation.

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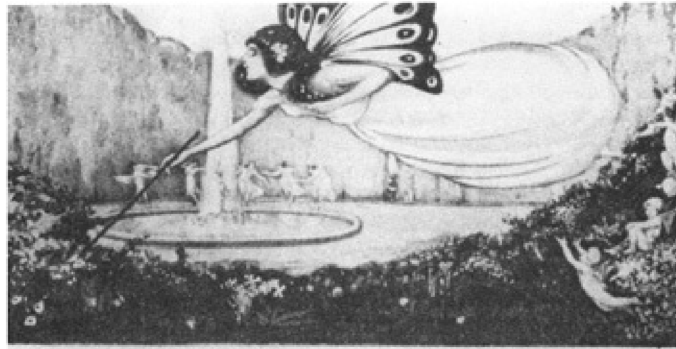

Madam C. J. Walker was probably the first African-American woman to become a millionaire.

In most cases, however, such businesses were precarious enterprises whose owners had little extra cash for emergencies or to tide them over during occasional slow months. The limited clientele had little to spend and often needed short-term credit to weather bouts of unemployment. Retail shops sold small items, more likely to be priced in cents than in dollars. Corner groceries, barber shops, beauty parlors: All were unstable operations. Retail businesses were especially risky because whites (often European immigrants with few other business opportunities) could open stores in black neighborhoods and compete, largely because they had greater access to borrowed money and supplies. Barbering, undertaking, and beauty shops, on the other hand, did not face competition from white entrepreneurs reluctant to deal with black bodies.

One of the manufacturing opportunities open to black entrepreneurs lay in supplying cosmetics to African-American beauticians. Among the earliest of these manufacturers was Madam C. J. Walker, a St. Louis laundress who in the 1890s developed the first commercially successful hair-straightening process. The daughter of ex-slaves, she grew up in Mississippi as Sarah Breedlove; she later took her name from her second husband, Charles Joseph Walker. By the 1910s the Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company stood at the center of an empire of approximately twenty thousand managers, sales agents, clerks, and factory workers. Walker, who died in 1919, was probably the first African-American woman to join the ranks of

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American millionaires.

Walker's business success was unusual, but not unique. Other African Americans accumulated fortunes in the cosmetics business, in some cases opening schools to train beauticians in their particular method and, of course, tying that method to a particular line of products. Anthony Overton established the Overton Hygienic Manufacturing Company in Kansas City, Kansas, in 1898 and moved the company to Chicago in 1911. Sales of such products as High Brown Face Powder provided him with sufficient resources to diversify into real estate development and journalism. But all of this remained within a black world. Overton developed property in Chicago's South Side ghetto, known to many as "Bronzeville"; his newspaper, the *Chicago Bee*, had few white readers or advertisers.

This business class, however, remained small. With an even smaller professional class, and many businessmen barely holding on, the top of the class structure of urban black communities was extremely limited. Except at the very highest levels, status tended to depend less on wealth or on white definitions of occupational prestige than on notions of "refinement" and "respectability" maintained by the upper and middle classes. The few professionals tended to dominate the highest rungs, with the more secure businessmen (most were, in fact, men) close behind.

In northern cities, postal workers, porters serving railroad travelers in luxurious Pullman cars, and servants employed by the best hotels and wealthiest white families constituted much of the solid middle class. Other workers with stable incomes and some education could also claim middle-class status. What often mattered most was property ownership, preferred leisure activities, and membership in an appropriate club, lodge, or church.

This group, based in black businesses and social institutions, seized the mantle of African-American leadership in most urban black communities around the turn of the century. They replaced the older elite whose commitment to integration sometimes led them to oppose building separate institutions to serve the community. In many cities, for example, it was clear that if blacks wanted a YMCA it would have to be a segregated institution. Banks, hospitals, professional baseball teams, social service institutions, political organizations—North and South, their existence often depended on the willingness of black communities to accept segregated institutions.

Baseball provides a typical example of the shift from blacks' slight access to white institutions to the establishment of a segregated black world. In the nineteenth century, a handful of black players joined white athletes on professional diamonds. By the early twentieth century they had been driven out, relegated to all-black barnstorming tours and marginally successful leagues.

Only after the First World War, under the tenacious and imaginative leadership of Rube Foster, owner-manager of Chicago's American Giants, would the Negro National League establish a stable setting for black baseball. Black players flourished in this new arrangement, but they did so under conditions far inferior to those of their white counterparts. Yet the teams constituted a source of pride to the black communities that they represented. Whatever their individual team loyalties, black fans pulled together on the few occasions when Negro League stars competed against white major leaguers.

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These separate black institutions caused mixed feelings among black Americans. On the one hand, segregated institutions owed their existence to the exclusion of blacks from "mainstream" American life. In some cases African Americans even paid taxes for public facilities from which they were excluded. Finally, separate was almost never equal. African-American institutions such as schools, clubs, businesses, and athletic leagues nearly always lacked the facilities, money, and equipment available to their white counterparts.

At the same time, however, segregated institutions permitted community control over important cultural activities. A baseball team, a YMCA, a hospital, a retirement home—black communities could proudly claim these as their institutions maintained by and for African Americans.

Schooling for Leadership

In the early twentieth century, education was one area in which African Americans confronted the tension between the high price of segregation on the one hand and the advantages of community control on the other. Descended from slaves denied by the law any access to literacy, twentieth-century African Americans recognized the importance of education in the advancement of both individuals and the race as a whole. Black children needed schooling, and black Americans needed those schools to teach the values and skills required of a new generation of men and women who would lead the march toward equality and full citizenship.

Before the Civil War most Northern states had either excluded black children from public education or shunted them into separate schools. In some cities black communities and white abolitionists established private schools for black children. During the 1870s and 1880s, however, Northern state legislatures reversed legislation requiring segregation and even went so far as to prohibit the exclusion of children from their local school on the basis of race.

By the early twentieth century, many of the emerging ghettos in Northern cities were not yet sufficiently compact to enable white city officials to draw school district lines that would segregate neighborhood schools. In such cases black children attended schools that were predominantly, but not exclusively, African American. They were not the best schools their cities had to offer. They were housed in older buildings, often were overcrowded, and many of the white teachers looked down on their students. But they were decent schools, capable of providing students the opportunity to graduate from a high school that met the academic standards of the time. The schools were fully supported by tax dollars and taught by instructors with appropriate academic credentials.

Black Northerners valued these schools, and their children were less likely than the children of European immigrants to drop out as teenagers. They also valued integration, rising in protest whenever pressures emerged from segments of the white citizenry to segregate the schools. Most African Americans assumed, wisely, that the presence of whites guaranteed a certain degree of commitment from city politicians.

At the same time, however, Northern black communities had little control over what was taught or who stood in front of the classrooms. Nearly all school officials were white; so were the teachers, most of whom assumed that black children could not perform as well as their

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white peers. Some teachers simply assumed that the "white race" was more intelligent and more disciplined. Others who were more liberal extended sympathy to black children who they thought were crippled by the cultural heritage of African backwardness combined with the traumas of slavery. The cost of full integration into the system, even if not into completely integrated schools was clear: These were institutions *for* African Americans; but they were not African-American institutions.

By contrast, in most of the South black children went to schools staffed by black teachers and black principals. But the facilities varied from inadequate to abysmal. By the early twentieth century most Southern black children had some access to a public school, but in rural areas that school was likely to be open for less than six months of the year—even as little as two months in some cases. White planters wanted black children in the fields, not wasting their time sitting on the crude benches of a one-room schoolhouse.

In 1915, only fifty-eight percent of all black school-age children in the South were enrolled in school at all, compared with eighty percent of whites. City kids were the most likely to be in school. Attendance rates of black urban children lagged only slightly behind rates for whites, a remarkable comparison because few cities provided public high schools for black children.

In most Southern cities, especially in the Deep South, white civic leaders considered the education of black children an extravagance, a decision consistent with school systems that readily placed as many as sixty-five black children in dilapidated classrooms headed by a single teacher. The *Atlanta Constitution* left little doubt as to its idea of how much schooling black children needed, defending black education on the basis of its ability to "make a better cotton picker and a more efficient plowman."

By 1915, following a decade of unprecedented expansion in high school education in the South, neither Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, nor South Carolina had yet built a high school for black teenagers. The enlightened officials of Delaware, Florida, and Maryland had established a single black high school in each of these segregated states. During this period most American communities were transforming high school from a privilege available to those who could afford private school to a right funded by the taxpayers. Southern black youth were denied that right.

Tragically, black adults were among the taxpayers who supported the very school systems that allocated them only crumbs from an expanding pie. To provide better opportunities for their children, black Southerners had to mobilize their communities and do the work themselves. In effect, they paid twice—once for a public school system that allocated them a fraction of the money available to white schools and a second time to supplement those meager resources or pay tuition at a private black high school.

In many cases the additional burden was paid with labor rather than dollars, as many black Southerners had little more than their hands, tools, and skills to spare. Thousands of black public schools in the rural South were erected in the early twentieth century through donations from Chicago philanthropist Julius Rosenwald (the president of Sears, Roebuck & Company), who required that each community match his contribution dollar for dollar. In most cases public funds from white-controlled sources—that is, from taxes—amounted to less than the hard-earned cash generated within the black community.

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In addition to contributing to the construction of public schools, black Southerners built private schools, especially at the high-school level. At the turn of the century three-fourths of all Southern black high-school students attended a private school. Coming from grossly inadequate grammar schools, many of these students required remedial classes, further straining the already precarious budgets of these institutions.

Neither public nor private schools in the South were controlled by African Americans. Public school teachers and principals had to answer to white officials, most of whom cared less about whether black children were being educated than whether they were learning anything that threatened social stability. In Palmetto, Georgia, a teacher was dismissed for merely expressing his approval when President Theodore Roosevelt invited the exceedingly moderate black leader Booker T. Washington to dinner at the White House.

African-American private schools owed a different kind of allegiance. Although by the early twentieth century nearly all of these were headed by African Americans, they still depended on the contributions of Northern white philanthropists for a considerable portion of their budget. And in rural areas they remained vulnerable to white public opinion, which tolerated a black private school only if it clearly was not educating its students out of their place. Northern philanthropists, in part because they envisioned an increasingly industrialized South with a black work force, aimed for a considerably higher level of literacy than most white Southerners thought black children would ever need.

In spite of these limits on the independence of Southern black educators, many black schools were, in fact, community institutions. Black children were taught by black teachers partly because black parents had demanded this change during the closing decades of the nineteenth century. White officials had given in to this demand for financial reasons: Black teachers earned less than their white counterparts. But the large-scale entrance of African Americans into the teaching profession is significant nevertheless. These men and women played active roles in their communities, organizing women's clubs, farmers' clubs, boys' clubs, school improvement leagues, and various other self-improvement efforts.

African Americans looked upon schooling as a privilege—one that carried with it an obligation to use one's learning on behalf of the entire community. And teachers joined lawyers, social workers, librarians, nurses, doctors, and newspaper reporters and publishers as leaders of their community.

These educational institutions stood at the center of major divisions among black leaders about the role of African Americans in American society. All the schools taught the same basic values of industry, thrift, and service to the community. They recruited similar types of students. But curriculum and school leadership reflected different notions of how black Americans could attain full citizenship in a nation seemingly committed to their subordination. To what kinds of jobs should they aspire? How should they respond to the rising tide of segregation? Where should they look for allies? How hard should they push for immediate equality when few whites even considered African Americans capable of eventual equality?

Booker T. Washington's gospel of hard work, landownership, self-help, and success through small business struck genuine chords among most black Americans. To some, however, his accommodationist philosophy and the Atlanta Compromise conceded too much. John Hope, a

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young Southern educator and future college president, considered it “cowardly and dishonest for any of our colored men to tell white people or colored people that we are not struggling for equality.”

William Monroe Trotter, editor of the *Boston Guardian* (founded in 1901), was even more scathing. Washington’s willingness to accommodate to Jim Crow, along with his success in forging alliances with white businessmen, proclaimed Trotter, exposed him as “a coward” and a “self seeker.” He was “the Benedict Arnold of the Negro race, the Exploiter of Exploiters, the Great Traitor,” Trotter wrote.

In 1903 a more measured—and eventually more influential—challenge to Washington emerged in the form of a book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, by W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois, Trotter, and Hope stood out as spokesmen for a more militant response to the rising tide of racism, but they hardly stood alone. Residents of Southern cities, many of them people who admired Washington and acknowledged his distinction, participated in boycotts of Jim Crow streetcars between 1898 and 1904. In a few instances black Southerners even filed unsuccessful court suits challenging the legality of segregation ordinances.

In the North, where nineteenth-century black elites had developed ties to prominent whites and participated in a handful of integrated institutions (including high schools, colleges, political organizations, and an occasional club or philanthropic society), an older generation refused to abandon the goal of integration. The younger men and women of this class were less influential within the community than the rising class of black business and professional people catering to a black clientele. Nonetheless, many of this younger black middle class remained loyal to their parents’ ideals and emerged as some of Washington’s most articulate critics.

Moreover, despite Washington’s ability to influence the editorial policies of most black newspapers, Trotter’s was not the only militant editorial voice. Harry T. Smith, editor of the *Cleveland Gazette*, not only assailed any evidence of racial discrimination but he denounced the establishment of black facilities meant to provide services that comparable white institutions refused to provide to African Americans. He and others of like mind in Northern cities insisted that to build a black facility made it easier for the whites to maintain their policies of exclusion. Chicago’s black leadership had rejected a segregated YMCA in 1889 on these principles. Smith dismissed Washington’s Atlanta Compromise as a “doctrine of surrender.”

For much of the African-American leadership at the beginning of the century, politics involved more than a choice between racial integration or self-help, protest or accommodation, liberal or vocational education. Alliances shifted. Lines were never neat and clean. Du Bois broke with Washington eight years after the Atlanta Compromise speech. Mary Church Terrell publicly supported Washington while fighting for suffrage—for African Americans and for women.

Robert Abbott, editor of the *Chicago Defender*, was a graduate of the vocationally oriented Hampton Institute who believed that all black children should learn a trade and advised black Southerners to “stick to the farm.” He admired Washington and praised Tuskegee as a great black institution. At the same time his headlines offered very un-Washingtonian advice to black Southerners: “WHEN THE MOB COMES AND YOU MUST DIE TAKE AT LEAST ONE

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WITH YOU."

Yet there were occasions when black people felt they had to line up, to take a particular position. Led by Du Bois and Trotter, a small group, nearly all from the North and mostly urban college graduates, met in 1905 to form the Niagara movement. The movement was named for its meeting place on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls, a major terminus of the Underground Railroad. Du Bois had encountered difficulty arranging hotel accommodations on the American side. The following year the group met at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, the site of John Brown's famous raid on behalf of abolitionism.

The Niagara movement denounced white racism and demanded full citizenship for blacks and the abolition of all racial distinctions. At the same time it underscored the increasingly significant double bind facing African-American workers: Industrial employers hired them only as temporary strikebreakers, and most unions excluded them from membership.

Two events in 1906 underscored the immediacy of the Niagara movement's agenda, while at the same time pointing to the ineffectiveness of black protest up to this point. In August of that year President Theodore Roosevelt ordered the dishonorable discharge of three companies of black soldiers after they were accused of inciting a riot in Brownsville, Texas. Evidence of their responsibility was thin at best. They were more likely victims of violence than instigators. Their mistake, apparently, was in fighting back.

Roosevelt's "executive lynching" demonstrated that black Americans had few friends in high places. They had even fewer in the streets. In Atlanta, a month after the Brownsville incident and following a spate of local newspaper articles that fictitiously reported assaults on white women by black men, a mob of more than ten thousand white citizens freely attacked African Americans. The attacks continued for five days, and the police generally refused to interfere. The city's white establishment blamed the riot on irresponsible journalism and overreaction by lower-class whites. Nevertheless, most white Atlantans shared the mayor's conclusion that the bottom line was "black brutes [who] attempt rape upon our women." Once again, whites associated lynching with rape when in fact there had been no rape.

By 1908, the Niagara movement's weakness was as obvious as its astute analysis of the crisis of American race relations. Few of the movement's four hundred members bothered to pay dues; most of the black press ignored it as a handful of cranky elitists hurling manifestos. Whites paid even less attention.

The Niagara movement represents a turning point because of its view of race relations in the United States and its militant agenda for change. Its collapse coincided with an event that shocked the small portion of the Northern white population that considered racism a major "problem" in American life: lynchings and mob attacks on African Americans in Springfield, Illinois. The violence was ignited by a spark recognizable to anyone familiar with the behavior of Southern lynch mobs: A white woman had accused a black workman of rape (she later recanted, admitting that a white man whom she refused to name had beaten her). When the authorities removed the accused man from town to protect him from enraged white citizens, a mob gathered, determined to make the black community pay a price for its supposed tolerance of such criminal behavior. Five thousand soldiers were required to restore order after whites attacked black businesses, homes, and individuals.

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White Northerners had condemned the Atlanta riot but had explained away the terrorism by blaming it on the peculiar backwardness of the South. But in Abraham Lincoln's hometown, on the centennial of the great emancipator's birth? This event pushed the minority of white reformers who already had begun to question Booker T. Washington's accommodationist agenda to consider the views of Du Bois and the "radicals."

In 1910, the remnants of the Niagara movement joined with a small group of reformers—mostly white—who had met the previous year in response to the Springfield riot. Their new organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), began with a straightforward agenda: to secure the basic citizenship rights guaranteed by the 14th and 15th Amendments to the United States Constitution. Most specifically this meant the end of all segregation laws, a right to equal education, and a guarantee of the right to vote.

The NAACP would publicize discrimination whenever and wherever it occurred, lobby legislatures and Congress for civil rights legislation, and file lawsuits grounded in constitutional law. It also launched a campaign against lynching, which used research and on-site reports to undermine the standard Southern defense of lynching—that its real cause was black criminality and uncontrolled sexuality. Tame by twentieth-century standards, the NAACP departed significantly from Washington's accommodationism.

Like the Niagara movement, the NAACP was led mainly by elites. But it also sparked enthusiasm among two groups that the Niagara radicals had not tapped: the black middle and working classes, and white liberals. Although Du Bois was the only African American in the original "inner circle" of the organization, African Americans dominated the membership from the beginning. By 1918 the NAACP monthly magazine, *The Crisis* (founded and edited by Du Bois), claimed a circulation of 100,000. In the rural South many enthusiasts read and circulated the journal at considerable risk.

As African Americans like James Weldon Johnson and Walter White moved into more leadership roles after 1916 and local branches multiplied, the organization solidified its place at the center of the African-American protest movement for the next half-century.

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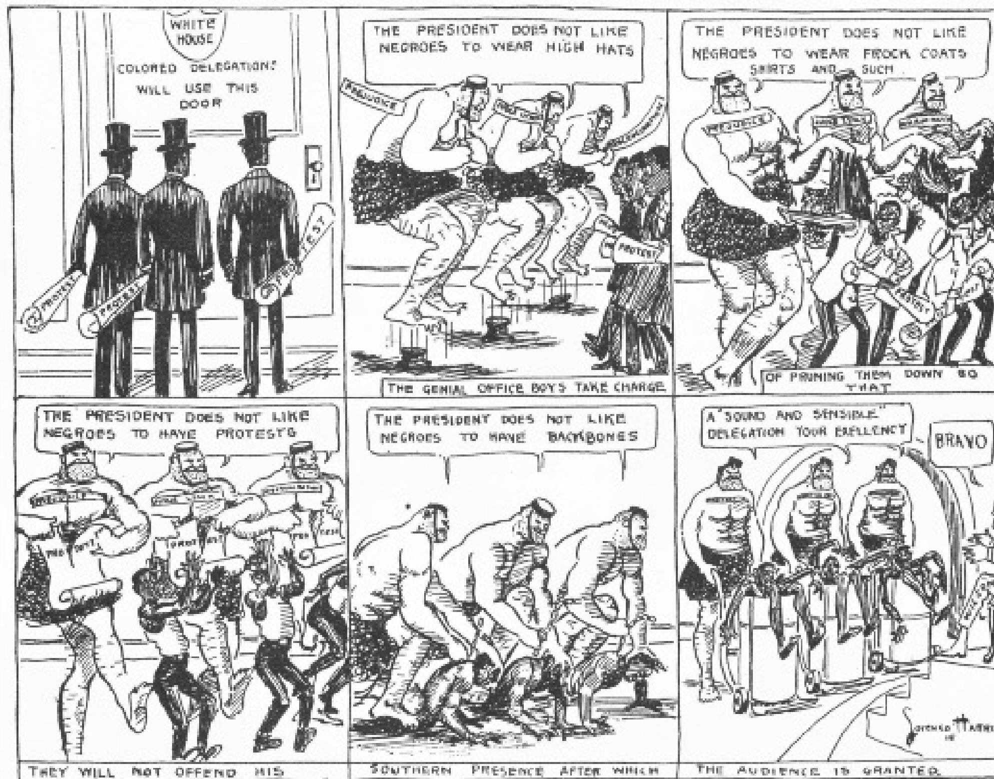

This cartoon, entitled "The Next Colored Delegation to the White House," appeared in *The Crisis* in 1916. It ridiculed the racist views of President Woodrow Wilson, a native of Virginia.

Equally crucial—and more controversial—was the level of white involvement, especially in the early years. Disdainful of efforts that depended on white goodwill, William Monroe Trotter remained skeptical of the organization's potential and kept his distance. Men and women at the other end of the social spectrum from the Harvard-educated Trotter were probably equally skeptical.

But the great portion of black leadership was moving toward a position best articulated by Ida B. Wells. Wells identified power as the bottom line. Washington was right in arguing that it was useless to wait for whites to help. Blacks should build whatever economic power they could. And he was right, she said, to argue that it was foolish to forget that power lay in white hands and that any strategy had to recognize that blacks were playing a weak hand. But Wells took this analysis a step further. She insisted that militant protest was both possible and effective if it could reach an audience of potentially sympathetic whites. America did not have a "Negro problem," she explained. It had a white problem.

The "Second Emancipation"

On August 25, 1893, Frederick Douglass stood wearily before a large audience at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The former abolitionist, journalist, and Republican politician had been chosen to deliver the principal address on the occasion of "Colored American Day" at the fair. The "Day" itself was controversial among African Americans. Many viewed the gesture as token recognition insufficient to compensate for their exclusion from planning and presenting exhibits. Separate, unequal, and subordinate, the special day

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smacked of Jim Crow.

Ida B. Wells advised African Americans to stay away from the exposition completely. Douglass shared Wells's anger, but the aging orator was reluctant to pass up the chance to expose American hypocrisy on an international stage. He denounced the nation that, proud of its own freedom, denied meaningful freedom to many of its own citizens. "There is no Negro Problem," Douglass proclaimed, only the problem of Americans refusing to "live up to their own Constitution."

Douglass's long career was coming to a close in 1893. With the approach of a new century he was passing the mantle of leadership to a new generation. Wells, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois had already claimed roles in this African-American vanguard. They would eventually be joined by a member of Douglass's audience, a young Georgian who would emerge as the voice of hope for tens of thousands of black Southerners, a "Black Moses," in the words of his biographer. His name was Robert Sengstacke Abbott.

Abbott came to the fair not to agitate but to entertain. Taking his place on the stage with the other three members of a vocal quartet from Hampton Institute, the twenty-five-year-old tenor was as captivated by the Windy City itself as he was by the inspiring words of Douglass and the excitement of performing at the great exposition. Like thousands of other fair visitors Abbott sensed that the future lay in Chicago.

After learning the printer's trade at Hampton, Abbott returned to Chicago in 1897, hoping to begin a career as a journalist. Ida B. Wells had resettled in Chicago two years earlier, resuming her career as a journalist and a crusader against lynching. That two ambitious young African Americans would share this interest is not surprising. The African-American press stood at the center of black American urban life and politics in the early twentieth century. Even in the rural South, religious newspapers permitted communication across county and state lines, connecting African-American communities to one another.

In the South, black newspapers filled columns with brief, but revealing, articles, usually noting when a woman—or occasionally a single man—was visiting relatives. A reader of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide,* for example, would learn that "Mr. Lonnie Jones, Norfolk, visited his parents, the Rev. and Mrs. Jones in Durham, North Carolina." These items were more than "filler"; readers wanted to know where people came from and who they visited. The linkage of family life, generation to generation, across distances great and small had become an important part of African-American culture.

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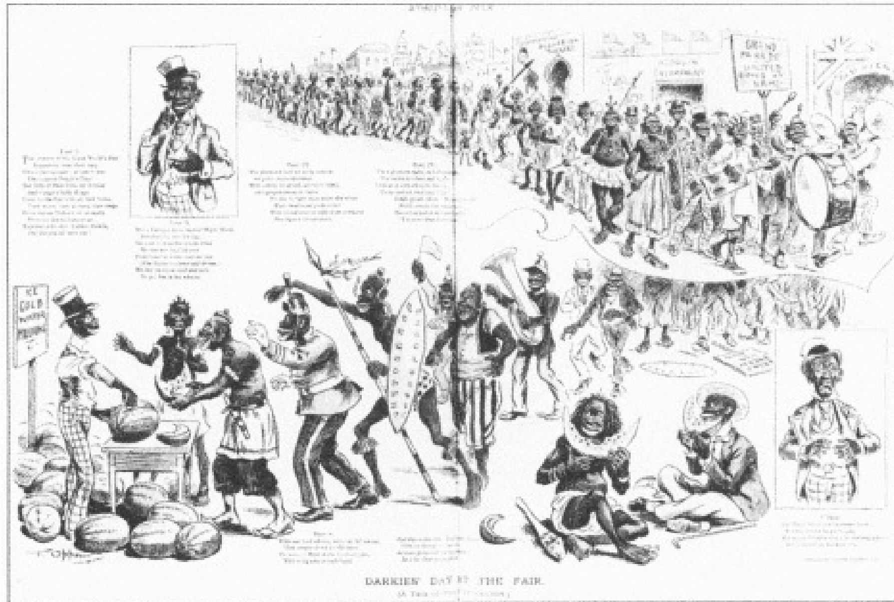

The cartoon “Darkies’ Day at the Fair” appeared in the British humor magazine *Puck*. It satirized the display of Africans at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, which Frederick Douglass and other African Americans found extremely offensive.

The idea of movement itself, an important theme in American history in general, has held special significance to the African-American experience. Upon emancipation many former slaves had tested their freedom by moving, if only a few miles to the next plantation. The impulse and its significance were so powerful that sixty-five years later, a woman declared an end to an interview about her early years as a slave by asserting her freedom to come and go. “I can go when I please and come back when I please. I’ll come to see you, I must go home now. I am a free rooster.”

Merely thinking about moving could boost the endurance of black workers who recognized that limited opportunities meant that moving along—rather than moving up—would eventually provide relief from their toil—at least until they began work someplace else.

For men, sawmills, turpentine camps, phosphate mines, and coal mines provided endless opportunities to move from place to place. Some were merely looking for work during breaks in the agricultural routine. Others sought liberation from farm life entirely. Cities promised more community life but fewer jobs, except in places like Birmingham, Alabama, where the steel mills provided unusual (though still limited) industrial opportunities. Women, always in demand as servants and laundresses, could more easily find stable employment. Families could, and did, move to the coal towns stretching across Appalachia south toward Birmingham. Some sought agricultural opportunities farther south in Florida, or—more often—west to the Mississippi Delta, Arkansas, and Texas. These destinations within the South drew African Americans who either persisted in their hopes to attain independence through landownership or whose frustration kept them on the move but with no other apparent alternative.

Frustration and alienation, however, could also provide the foundation for hope, for faith in the ability of black people to turn their backs on their “white problem” and build their own alternatives. Some were attracted to a growing movement to establish “black towns,” mainly in

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Oklahoma, but also as far west as Allensworth, California. The most common, and most enduring destination for potential black emigrants was Liberia, which had come to be considered a haven from American racism.

For most black Southerners, however, leaving the South meant moving north. And moving to the North meant the city. Northern farmland was expensive and most Northern rural communities expressed sympathy for oppressed blacks only as long as they remained oppressed *Southern* blacks.

Even in cities, as Robert Abbott learned, opportunities varied from nonexistent to scarce. Like other African-American craftsmen, most of whom had been trained in the South, this skilled printer found it impossible to find regular employment in a Northern city. Abbott took short-term printing jobs while attending Kent College of Law at night—the only African American in his graduating class. But the Chicago bar was no more hospitable to blacks than most of the city's neighborhood bars.

The rapidly growing metropolis of nearly two million people needed plenty of attorneys, but African-American legal business for the most part had to be generated by the small black community of thirty thousand people. An established core of black attorneys left little space for outsiders. Even within that community, Abbott found that his skin color put him at a disadvantage. A prominent African-American lawyer once curtly informed him that he was too dark to be effective in a courtroom.

Abbott returned to irregular employment as a printer, but with a larger goal in mind. On a May evening in 1905, he appeared on the streets of black Chicago selling the four-page *Chicago Defender*, which on its front page proclaimed itself "The World's Greatest Weekly." He began with virtually no money; the publisher and editor was also the reporting staff, business manager, and sales force. His landlady's kitchen table doubled as his desk.

Although the obstacles facing Robert Abbott illustrate the difficulties confronting black newcomers to Northern cities in the early years of the century, his actual experience was unusual. Black Southerners struggled mightily to provide their children with a decent education, but few young men or women reached the heights of a secondary or college degree. Moreover, Hampton, Tuskegee, and their offshoots encouraged graduates to remain in the South, to assume positions of leadership in their communities.

Black Southerners did move North during the early years of the twentieth century, but they did so in small numbers. Most came from the border states rather than such Deep South states as Abbott's native Georgia. Educated or uneducated, urban or rural, male or female, black Southerners who thought about the possibility of a better life elsewhere had to face the reality that earning a decent living in the North was close to impossible.

After building the *Defender* into a stable business, Abbott turned to the region of his birth and advised black Southerners that they should confront Southern racism rather than try to escape it. "The only wise thing to do," he declared in 1915, "is to stick to the farm." By then, however, increasing numbers of black Southerners were finding this advice difficult—if not impossible—to follow. A series of natural disasters during the preceding decade had struck with particular force in the cotton belt. In addition to boll weevils who "eat up all de cotton," drought followed by flood plagued Southern farmers. Consecutive years of poor crops in some

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counties had made it difficult for farmers to obtain credit, a necessity for tenants and owners of small farms. Hard times, however, were nothing new for black Southerners. They had endured Jim Crow for a generation. Most knew no life other than one of hard work with poverty as its reward. It is unlikely that a substantial number would have left the South as a result of these setbacks.

Something new was happening, however, in the North. The beginning of the First World War in Europe in 1914 sent shock waves across the Atlantic, stimulating the American economy while shutting off its traditional source of industrial labor. American manufacturers could earn astronomical profits, selling first to the European combatants and, by 1916, to a domestic market on the verge of conversion to a wartime economy. But where would the additional workers be recruited? The war had stopped immigration from Europe. Within a year American entry into the war would divert thousands of men from the labor force to the armed forces. New sources of labor would have to be found.

Labor shortages hit first on the railroads, which were traditional employers of large numbers of casual laborers. By 1916 these men could find more secure and lucrative jobs in factories. Before railroad companies would turn to African Americans, however, they had to exhaust other alternatives. Some railroad executives assumed that they could recruit Mexicans to perform the regular track maintenance required every spring in the Northeast and Midwest. Other railroad executives looked to a different labor source. "By starting track work early," one executive explained, it would be possible to complete this chore with "American labor. The American hobo caught in the spring of the year will work."

Leaving aside this common assumption that the category "American" did not include African-American workers, such approaches reveal that employers considered the shortage temporary, requiring little rethinking of traditional assumptions about the ability of black men to do a "white man's job." Referring to employment patterns in Northern cities, the magazine *New Republic* observed in mid-1916 that "the Negro gets a chance to work only when there is no one else."

The notion of "no one else" depended not only on ideas about race, but also about gender. Many employers first reconsidered whether white man's work was necessarily man's work. During the First World War thousands of white women moved into meat packinghouses, munitions and chemical factories, electrical industries, and other workplaces previously reserved for their husbands, fathers, and brothers. But stereotypes about gender were powerful, and employers generally considered women unsuitable for most types of industrial work.

In the packinghouses, for example, women could stuff and pack sausages but they were considered incapable of such tasks as herding animals, butchering, or lugging meat. To keep the production lines running, therefore, industrialists were forced to experiment with employing black men, generally referred to as "the Negro." The experiment spread to black women when new opportunities for white women left jobs open at the bottom of the hierarchy of female work. For the first time in American history, the nation's basic industries offered production jobs to African Americans. From New York, Boston, and Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, Chicago, Detroit, and to a lesser extent Los Angeles, factory gates opened.

Work in railroad yards, steel mills, food-processing plants, garment shops, and other

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industries paid wages far beyond what was available in the rural or urban South. But it was more than the money that attracted black Southerners north. These jobs also represented portals into the industrial economy. These opportunities promised a new basis for claims to full citizenship—a promise that a previous generation of black Southerners had envisioned in the possibility of landownership.

Approximately 500,000 black Southerners moved between 1916 and 1919, with twice that many following during the 1920s. This movement, known as the "Great Migration," would ebb and flow until the 1970s, shifting the center of gravity of African-American culture from the rural South to the urban North. Southern cities drew increasing numbers of men and women from surrounding counties, many of whom stayed only long enough to earn enough money to move to the relative prosperity of the North. Employment in the coal mines of Appalachia drew thousands of others north as well. Smaller numbers headed west, especially toward Los Angeles, which by 1900 had surpassed San Francisco as the largest African-American community in that region. But the best opportunities and the highest wages lay in the North. What the North offered was a new start; Robert Abbott called the Great Migration a "second emancipation."

The men and women who translated the opening of new opportunities into a vast population movement had good reason for their optimism. These were not refugees blown across the winds of historical change. Rather, this was a movement of men and women who first sought information and then traveled established routes to destinations already inhabited by friends or relatives.

In the earliest months of the Great Migration—the fall and winter of 1916–17—recruiters working for Northern industry attracted attention in the South with stories of high wages and better living conditions in the North. Many of these recruiters were actually black workers visiting "home" with instructions (and cash incentives) from employers to recruit "reliable" friends and relatives.

In other cases black Southerners readily accepted offers of jobs and even free transportation only because they had already heard from other African Americans about the new opportunities and the differences in race relations. Men working in railroad yards and on trains, for example, could readily spread information along the tracks.

Chicago enjoyed a special reputation, because it was the home of the best-selling black newspaper in the South, the *Chicago Defender*. Fearless, sensational, and militant, Robert Abbott's newspaper expressed a perspective that was dangerous, if not impossible, for black Southerners to maintain in the presence of whites. Red ink announced lynchings, and readers were encouraged to fight back.

Abbott's advice shifted focus when jobs became available in Northern cities. Like other business leaders in Northern black communities he recognized that migration from the South promised opportunity not only for migrants, but also for African-American businesses and political interests. He became the primary cheerleader for "The Exodus," at one point fueling the bandwagon by setting a specific date for people to participate in a "Great Northern Drive."

Innumerable other links joined North and South, city and country. Fraternal organizations and church conventions met in different cities each year, providing opportunities to visit, see

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the sights, and listen to hosts brag. Returning home for weddings, funerals, or just to show off their accomplishments, migrants flaunted city clothes and spoke of voting, going to big league baseball games, and passing white people on the street without having to step into the gutter.

Alighting in a train depot downtown could stimulate exhilaration, which writer Richard Wright recalled feeling when he looked around the station for the familiar “FOR WHITE” and “FOR COLORED” signs that hung over water fountains, bathrooms, snack bars, and elsewhere in Southern terminals. He paused at a newsstand, feeling a tinge of anxiety as he exchanged coin for newspaper, “without having to wait until a white man was served.”

For some, this sense of liberation was tempered by a combination of uncertainty, anxiety, and even fear. The famed musician Louis Armstrong later recalled his terror upon disembarking in a Chicago train station in 1922. He scanned the crowd, unable to locate his mentor Joe Oliver, who had made the same journey from New Orleans a few years earlier:

> I saw a million people, but not Mister Joe, and I didn’t give a damn who else was there. I never seen a city that big. All those tall buildings. I thought they were universities. I said, no, this is the wrong city. I was fixing to take the next train back home—standing there in my box-back suit, padded shoulders, double-breasted wide-leg pants.

Armstrong’s anxiety, one that characterized millions of immigrants to American cities decades before and after he made his move, was very different from Wright’s. Armstrong worried about city life. Wright pondered the difficulty of making the transition from a region where the rules of interaction (and separation) were spelled out and inflexible to the more ambiguous patterns of the North.

The Promise of the Cities

The Thomas family arrived in Chicago in the spring of 1917. Like thousands of other black Southerners moving north at the time, their first task was to find a home. For a week they pounded the pavements of the South Side ghetto. To look elsewhere would have been futile. In Chicago the “black belt,” along with a few other scattered neighborhoods, provided the only housing available to African Americans. The parents, their nineteen-year-old daughter, and a son two years younger crowded into a five-room apartment—cramped, but probably larger than the farmhouse they had left behind in Alabama.

The second task was to find work. The men went off to the stockyards; the women turned to the familiar trade of wringing the dirt out of other people’s clothing. Optimistic about the future, the teenagers spent their evenings in night school, hoping to improve on the grade-school education they had brought with them from a rural Southern schoolhouse. In their free time the family explored the leisure activities available on Chicago’s South Side, carrying picnics into the park and venturing into theaters and ice-cream parlors.

This family’s experience hardly invokes the idea of a “second emancipation.” The Thomases struggled with the mundane aspects of everyday life that confront anyone who leaves home to begin a new life elsewhere. For poor people this was a particularly daunting challenge. For African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century, most choices also were limited by racial discrimination. By 1918 migration chains linking South and North enabled thousands of

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Southerners to choose destinations where they had friends or relatives to offer a welcoming hand. A Southern town, city, or county might develop links to many Northern cities, but a particularly strong connection usually reached toward one or two potential destinations.

In most cases these patterns conformed to lines of longitude, largely because of railroad routes. North and South Carolinians went to New York, Philadelphia, and other eastern seaboard cities. Pittsburgh's African-American newcomers were likely to hail from Alabama, Georgia, or Kentucky. From Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, and parts of Georgia and Alabama, people headed for Chicago—an especially popular destination because of the influence of the *Chicago Defender* and the long tentacles of the Illinois Central Railroad.

Arriving during a wartime housing shortage, most migrants encountered difficulty finding a home. Choices were limited. In the largest cities, emerging African-American ghettos provided obvious starting points, with New York's Harlem and Chicago's South Side especially well known among Southerners. In medium-sized cities like Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Buffalo, the process of ghettoization had begun before the Great Migration, but there was not yet a district so dominated by black residents that the neighborhood seemed segregated. In Los Angeles most blacks lived in an area that stretched thirty blocks along Central Avenue, but as late as 1919 their neighbors included Mexicans, Italians, and Russian Jews.

In some cases local geography was a crucial factor. Pittsburgh's hills and hollows, breaking toward the rivers, contrasted sharply with Chicago's flat prairie or the unbroken expanse of Manhattan Island. African-American steelworkers in the Pittsburgh area did not inhabit a single district, instead congregating in a series of steel mill communities with the largest concentration in Pittsburgh itself. Still, however, they tended to live in enclaves, in neighborhoods that became increasingly segregated during the First World War and the 1920s.

In general northbound migrants entered cities where housing segregation had proceeded far enough to exclude them from most neighborhoods. But the state of flux was such that in most cases a black Northerner in 1920 was likely to have at least a few white neighbors within a couple of blocks. By 1930, that likelihood had diminished considerably, with African Americans segregated into ghettos—neighborhoods dominated by a single group excluded from other parts of the city.

Ghettos are not, however, necessarily slums. Harlem, in particular, was not a slum on the eve of the Great Migration. A middle-class neighborhood barely a decade earlier, it suffered from overcrowding during and after the war. Most urban black neighborhoods were less fortunate at the outset, with aging housing stock ill suited to the rapid influx of newcomers beginning in 1916.

Segregation by itself did not cause a decline in either housing standards or the quality of a neighborhood. What segregation meant was that neither black newcomers nor established residents could move beyond the borders of the emerging ghettos, except for gradual expansion at the fringes of these neighborhoods. The result was overcrowding and a strain on the physical capacity of buildings.

This strain was also a result of the economics of ghettoization. Contrary to popular belief, property values have not always declined as neighborhoods shifted from "white" to "black." During the Great Migration and throughout much of the twentieth century the process was more

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complicated. As Southerners, most of them poor and unaccustomed to urban life, moved into the least expensive and oldest neighborhoods, established residents tended to seek better housing in less crowded districts. But ghettos could expand only slowly, and only at their edges. Real estate speculators purchased homes in these border districts, often by frightening white homeowners with the prospect of "Negro invasion." Known as "blockbusting," this tactic yielded generous profits, as the investor could sell the properties to black home buyers at inflated rates. In Los Angeles, for example, the markup (in essence a race tax) went as high as one hundred percent. African-American purchasers had nowhere else to go because of the limitations defined by a dual housing market: one set of choices for whites, one (more limited) for blacks. In Northern and Western cities, African Americans generally paid more than whites would pay for equivalent living space.

At the same time, however, black workers earned less than their white counterparts. What this meant was that African Americans spent an inordinate proportion of their income on shelter. In Harlem, rents generally commanded nearly half of the earnings of African-American residents, placing a considerable burden on family budgets. There and elsewhere, the solution often lay in transforming a home into a commercial enterprise. Families rented out rooms to lodgers, often relatives or former neighbors recently arrived from the South.

Lodging, however, constituted only one type of residential overcrowding. In the long run, the deterioration of buildings probably owed more to a different way of crowding more people into limited spaces—the division of houses and apartments into smaller units by landlords eager to squeeze out more rent. Real estate investors who operated in the "white" market made profits by developing what are known as "subdivisions," large tracts of land divided into individual lots for residential construction. Building a subdivision increased the value of the land and its environs.

On the African-American side of the dual housing market, a very different kind of "subdivision" took place, one that was equally profitable but that eventually drove values down rather than up. An investor would purchase a single-family home or an apartment building and divide the structure into a rabbit warren of small apartments, known in some cities as "kitchenettes" and in others as "efficiency units." These spaces were efficient because their inhabitants (often families) slept, cooked, ate, socialized, and relaxed in a single room. The rental income from these converted buildings yielded a quick profit, thereby increasing the value of the property. But these buildings deteriorated equally rapidly, due to shoddy renovation and inadequate maintenance.

The dual housing market contributed to the deterioration of some African-American neighborhoods in other ways as well. With a captive market for their properties, landlords collected rents more assiduously than they maintained their buildings. Tenants who demanded proper maintenance (and many of them did) would usually be replaced with newcomers who either knew little about what to expect or took what they could get because choices were few.

African Americans who purchased homes often overpaid because of their inability to shop throughout the city. In some cases this left homeowners without enough money to maintain their houses adequately. Despite the continuing presence of middle-class African-American neighborhoods, invisible to whites who blithely equated slum with ghetto, the trend was downward.

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During the First World War and sporadically during the 1920s it was easier for black newcomers to find places to work in Northern cities than to find places to live. The Great Migration itself was catalyzed by the opening of thousands of new railroad jobs, mainly laying track and performing manual tasks around rail yards. By 1917, although still largely excluded from industrial work in the West, African Americans were working in heavy industry across the Northeast and Midwest.

On the whole these black men and women were relegated to jobs disdained by their white counterparts, who took advantage of wartime opportunities to advance into more skilled positions. Most of these jobs in steel mills, auto plants, packinghouses, and rubber factories required little skill and could be learned quickly. The hardest part for many migrants from the South was probably the adaptation to a different approach to time—an adjustment confronted by generations of rural workers around the world upon their introduction to industrial employment.

In the rural South, as in other agricultural societies, the calendar and the weather determined the rhythm of work. Planting, cultivating, and harvesting were performed at the same time each year, but with variation according to the weather. Cotton cultivation was characterized by one planter as "a series of spurts rather than by a daily grind."

But this would not work on an assembly line in Detroit. By the early twentieth century, workers in most Northern factories were punching time clocks. Arrive ten minutes late and your pay was docked one hour. On the "disassembly lines" of the packinghouses, conveyer belts moved carcasses from worker to worker, each of whom would make a single cut. Tardiness or absence could disrupt the whole process. Moreover, once the line began moving, the newcomer had no control over the pace of work.

Newcomers to industrial labor also had to accustom themselves to repeating a single task rather than completing an operation from start to finish. A man who formerly butchered a whole hog now performed only a single task among more than a hundred. A woman accustomed to picking up dirty laundry from customers and dropping it off cleaned and ironed might take a job in one of the many mechanized laundries employing thousands of black women in Northern and Southern cities. There she could spend hour after hour, day after day, only pressing cuffs, yokes, or sleeves.

Most migrants, however, not only stayed with these jobs but encouraged their friends and relatives to join them. The hard work produced rewards during the war years and the 1920s. In interviews and in letters back home, migrants spoke enthusiastically of sending their children to school, voting, sitting where they pleased on the streetcars, and other accomplishments.

Migrants to Southern cities encountered a somewhat different employment picture. With fewer basic manufacturing industries than Northern cities, places like Louisville, Norfolk, Nashville, and Mobile provided fewer opportunities. Industries directly related to war production, especially shipyards in coastal cities, provided most of the new jobs. But where black men in the North generally held onto their foothold at the bottom of the industrial ladder until nearly the end of the 1920s, their Southern counterparts suffered the fate of black women: When the war ended most were pushed back into menial service employment.

Northern employers were willing to permit black industrial workers to keep their positions

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in part because they had learned during the war that these men could do the job. But the decision drew equally on two other factors: immigration restriction and the threat of unionization. Beginning in 1921 federal legislation limited immigration from nations outside the Western hemisphere to a trickle, once again forcing industrialists to look beyond European immigrants for a supply of new workers.

At the same time, union organizing campaigns in major industries during the war had convinced Northern employers that maintaining racial divisions within their work force was a strong weapon against unionization. When African-American workers passed through factory gates to their new jobs during the war, they had a reputation among white workers and employers as instinctively antiunion. This image was not entirely accurate. Black Southerners had joined unions as early as 1872 on the New Orleans docks. In cities across the South, black carpenters and bricklayers had joined segregated union locals around the turn of the century.

On the whole, however, few black workers did belong to unions, largely because most unions either excluded them from membership or simply made no attempt to organize them. In addition, most unions at the time organized mainly skilled craft workers such as carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers, printers, and cigar makers, showing little interest in the agricultural and service occupations in which most African Americans worked. Only the United Mine Workers (UMW) and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) systematically organized unskilled workers.

The IWW had little presence in areas populated by African Americans, although it did have some success among black dockworkers in Philadelphia and timber workers in the Louisiana forests. The UMW stood alone among major national unions in its willingness and ability to enlist African-American members. But even among the mine workers, racial divisions frequently hampered the ability of the union to maintain solidarity. Thus when white union workers went on strike, employers could—and occasionally did—tap a substantial pool of underemployed and nonunion African Americans to replace the strikers. In coal mines and packinghouses, on the railroads and in hotel restaurants, African-American workers had filled the places of white unionists on strike since the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

Between 1917 and 1921, unions undertook major organizing campaigns most notably (in terms of the role of black workers) in steel, meat packing, and coal. Except in the Appalachian coal mines these campaigns made little headway in the South, but in major industrial centers across the Northeast and Midwest workers joined by the thousands. What made a difference was that for the first time, unions in steel and meat packing organized by *industry*, as coal miners did, rather than by *craft*, or specific occupation, as workers did in the building trades. In addition union leadership recognized that black workers were now part of the industrial labor force and would have to be included if an organizing campaign were to succeed.

Many black industrial workers did join unions during and immediately after the war, but more either dropped out quickly or never joined at all. Some black workers had difficulty appreciating the sincerity of the unions' welcome, given the record of racial exclusion and the continuing hostility among white workers and local union leadership in some areas. Others were reluctant to risk the jobs that had provided the path out of the Jim Crow South. Perhaps most important, however, was the difference in how black and white workers saw the relationship between their community and their workplace.

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White industrial workers often lived in neighborhoods near the plant; unions were as much community institutions as workplace institutions. In most cities, however, African Americans lived in increasingly segregated neighborhoods away from their workplaces, which tended to be lumped with a white world dominated by white institutions. Except for the handful of African-American unions, most notably the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, founded in 1925, unions were likely to be perceived as white organizations, unable or unwilling to understand the needs of black workers.

Even though black workers identified strongly with their community and its institutions, the class differences that preceded the Great Migration remained. Indeed, these Northern urban black communities now experienced even deeper divisions. Newcomers were more likely than established residents to come from the Deep South and to work at industrial jobs that previously had played no role in the black class structure because blacks had been excluded from these workplaces. They also encountered African-American communities that encouraged migration yet held the migrants themselves at arm's length. "They didn't seem to open-arm welcome them," recalled a porter at one of Chicago's busy railroad stations, "but they seemed to welcome them."

People who called themselves "Old Philadelphians" ("O.P.'s") in one city, or "Old Settlers" in others, generally considered northbound migration to be "good for the race." The wages workers carried home increased the flow of dollars into black businesses. The votes of newcomers, most of them loyal to the Republican party, increased the clout of black politicians. Moreover their departure from the South dealt a blow to Jim Crow and proclaimed to the nation that black Southerners were not the "happy Negroes" depicted by Southern white spokesmen. The *Cleveland Gazette*, echoing other African-American newspapers, cheered the exodus as evidence that black Southerners understood the folly of "depending upon the people [white southerners] who have destroyed them in the past to aid them in the future." Instead, migrants could depend on black leadership in Northern communities to represent their interests and ease the transition to their new homes.

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The future of the Negro lies in his Health.

WAR, DISEASE, FAMINE Now a MEMORY

Reconstruction in 1919 must begin with toning up the health of the individual and comunity.

The War's backwash caused Pittsburgh's death rate to increase 43% last year.

Negroes suffered greatly. The amount of sickness was appalling.

7,320 deaths in Pittsburgh from **Pneumonia** and **Influenza** last year. 630 were Negroes.

To YOU, who have recovered, Specialists say that "the after effects are as bad or worse than the disease."

Watch that weakened Heart or those Kidneys or Lungs. If in doubt --see your Doctor.

Tuberculosis kills relatively almost twice as many Negroes as white people;—if treated in time, it can be cured. Consult the Tuberculosis Dispensary at once.

Bad teeth means a bad stomach, which cause indirectly 75% of all sickness.

The Medical examination of our draftees— your sons, husbands and sweethearts has shown the alarming prevalence of Venereal diseases.

Read that Literature.

ARE YOU MOVING? READ

A Negro family moved into a house vacated by a foreigner in the East End one month ago. One week afterward the whole family, man, wife and three children were seriously ill from germs left in the house—one child died. "Nuf Sed."

Fully half of all the sickness and deaths are preventable, this means that 45 out of every 100 Negroes who died last year ought to be living.

BABIES DO NOT HAVE TO HAVE Measles, Scarlet Fever, Whooping Cough, etc.

Twice as many Negro babies die before they reach one year of age than babies of all other races in the City.

Find the nearest Baby Health Station and take your baby regularly.

The League Office will give you information on request.

IMMEDIATE STEPS.

See that your garbage and waste is moved promptly.

Don't live in or over damp basements.

In 1919, the Urban League of Pittsburgh ran its second annual Negro Health Education Campaign. It advised African Americans to seek medical attention for infectious diseases, to see their dentists regularly, and to practice good sanitation.

Black Southerners arriving in cities encountered an array of agencies committed to helping them find places in the city. The most systematically active and professionalized of these were the local branches of the National Urban League. Founded in 1911, the Urban League added dozens of branches during the decade after 1916, in a wide variety of cities across the country.

Although services varied from city to city, the Urban League developed a reputation among black Southerners preparing to leave home as an organization "that cares for Southern emigrants." This care came in the form of job and housing registries, which often dispensed advice on work habits, housekeeping, and coping with landlords and city officials. Urban League officials in Pittsburgh proudly referred to their instructions to women on "the use of gas, electricity, marketing of foods, how to purchase and prepare cheap cuts of meat."

Black branches of the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations initiated cooperative programs with employers and established room registries and recreation programs. In some cases community centers, churches, and women's clubs developed day-care programs, a crucial service given the unusually high level of married African-American women who held paid jobs. The husbands of black working women earned less than white men. Thus it was not unusual for these women to add wage labor to the customary housekeeping burdens of wives and mothers.

The assistance of clubs and groups like the Urban League, however, came with a double edge. Clubwomen concerned about the availability of child care for domestic workers were

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equally concerned about respectable housekeeping habits and public appearance. Newcomers were told not to wear head rags, scarves that Northern black women saw as symbols of servility and second-class citizenship. On a front porch shoes were a must, aprons a no-no. Like the settlement houses in white immigrant neighborhoods, YMCAs and YWCAs tried to compete with the streets and saloons for workers' leisure hours. And like the settlement houses, their efforts, though well meant, were often insulting and only partly successful.

Black newspapers printed lists of "do's and don'ts" similar to the lectures printed on Urban League brochures. Most of these lessons dealt with public behavior, reflecting anxieties about the impact of the migrants' Southern and rural habits on white images of African Americans. When newcomers were lectured not to "allow children to beg on the streets," encourage gambling, congregate in loud crowds, or "act discourteously to other people in public places," they sensed they were being talked down to. And they were.

In the North, even among African Americans, Southerners encountered a contempt for rural Southern culture. At the same time, however, these instructions reflected realistic concerns about Northern race relations and the differences between North and South. Northern whites did see African Americans as belonging to a single, unchanging, unified culture. Whatever black Northerners had accomplished in developing a community reputation could crumble under the onslaught of the new images conveyed by newcomers.

W. E. B. Du Bois recognized the dilemma of streetcar behavior in terms of the prevailing etiquette that required a male passenger to offer his seat to a female. This was something that migrants supposedly did not do, reflecting poorly on African-American manners and gentility. Southern black men were not by nature rude, observed Du Bois. But they had learned in the South to avoid interaction with white women. Even eye contact at the wrong time and place could provoke a lynching. Offering a seat to a white woman implied a social grace, a statement of manhood that was acceptable in the South only if accompanied by the kind of shuffle and deference that had no place in the North. Many black men who had recently arrived from the South took the safe—if "discourteous"—route. When a white woman boarded, they averted their glance and kept their seats.

Many newcomers responded to what they considered a cool reception by distancing themselves, especially on Sunday morning. Thousands left the big urban churches they had initially found so exciting and established smaller congregations in storefronts, often sending back home for their minister. Yet they continued to read the local black newspaper and align themselves politically with the established leaders of their communities.

This identification with the community, with the "home sphere," reflected the ways in which African Americans fit into early-twentieth-century American cities. Where they could (and could not) live related closely to race. Their children sat in classes filled mainly with other black children but with a white teacher standing in front. Whites owned the big stores; blacks, the small shops. And nearly all bosses were white. For white workers, race was taken for granted and class divisions often seemed to explain injustices and inequalities. But for black workers—and most African Americans earned working-class incomes—injustice and inequality had a distinctly racial cast. Class differences mattered, especially when thinking about the internal workings of their own community. But "their own community" was defined mainly by race.

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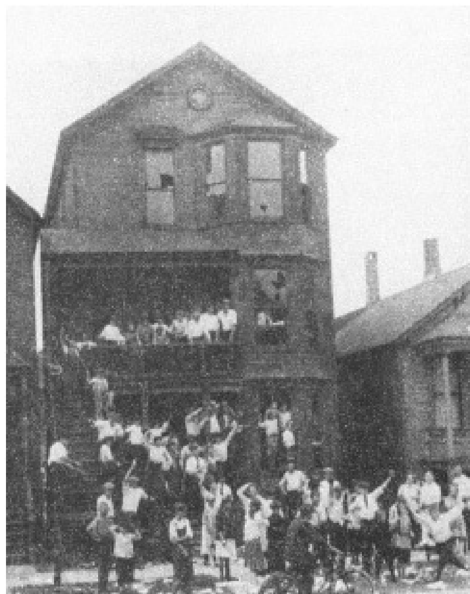
Black Southerners who moved north hoping to leave behind the color line and racial hostilities quickly learned a harsher reality. The rules were unwritten in the North, but they were rules nevertheless. These neighborhoods were off-limits; those restaurants "don't serve Negroes." Sit where you want on the streetcar but don't be surprised if a white passenger moves away. Many teachers made no secret of their belief in the inability of black children to learn as quickly as their white peers. And there was violence.

In 1917, less than a year after industrial jobs first opened in the North, black workers in East St. Louis, Illinois (across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, Missouri), learned how dangerous their new homes could be. Thousands of black Southerners had come to work in aluminum factories, many of them recruited by employers seeking to replace striking white workers. The combination was explosive: cynical industrial managers using race to divide their workers, union organizers who raised the familiar cry of "nigger scab," corrupt white politicians, irresponsible journalists, and police inclined to look the other way when whites attacked blacks. The result was a race riot.

Nine whites and at least thirty-nine African Americans were killed; it was impossible to establish the number of black victims because their dead bodies were allegedly thrown into ditches and never recovered. The coroner was more concerned with white fatalities. Thousands of black residents were left homeless by fires set by white arsonists. Three weeks later, Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and other NAACP officials led a protest march down New York's Fifth Avenue. Following muffled drums, ten thousand men and women marched from Harlem through the heart of Manhattan in complete silence, with only their signs expressing their outrage.

Two years later violence erupted once more, this time in twenty-five cities and towns during a six-month period. James Weldon Johnson called it the "Red Summer," referring to the blood that flowed from racial conflict. Attacks occurred in rural Arkansas; small-town Texas; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Charleston, South Carolina; Knoxville, Tennessee; Washington, D.C.; and Omaha, Nebraska. Only the West was spared, probably because black populations were not yet large enough to pose a threat to the stability of white neighborhoods or to white men's jobs.



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A triumphant group of young rioters celebrates outside a damaged home during the 1919 Chicago riots.

The worst riot was in Chicago, where black and white Chicagoans battled in the streets for five days in July, with occasional attacks punctuating an uneasy calm the following week. Catalyzed by an attack on a black teenager who had floated onto a “white” beach, the violence was initiated by white street gangs fighting to secure their turf, their community’s jobs, and their political patrons’ power against the threat posed by the influx of African Americans into the city. The police stood by as blacks passing through white neighborhoods were beaten. In response black Chicagoans set upon whites as well, usually inside the boundaries of the black ghetto. Only a timely rainstorm and the Illinois National Guard restored order.

No silent marches this time. In many of these conflicts the protest had come immediately and on the field of battle. Nineteenth-century “race riots” had generally consisted of attacks on black communities while authorities looked the other way. Blacks sometimes defended themselves but seldom counterattacked. But in Longview, Texas, in 1919, blacks responded to an attempt to drive the local *Defender* agent out of town by taking out their rifles. In Chicago white peddlers and merchants in the “Black Belt” were attacked after the initial assaults on African Americans. Claude McKay’s poem, “If We Must Die,” published in July 1919, articulated the mood:

> If we must die, let it not be like hogs
> Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
> While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
> Making their mock at our accursed lot.

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Members of the 369th Colored Infantry arrive home in New York in 1919. Every member of this unit—the first of the African-American troops to see action—received the Croix de Guerre for gallantry.

If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

"New Negroes"

On February 17, 1919, less than two years after the dramatic "silent protest" parade from Harlem to downtown Manhattan, another set of disciplined marchers walked Fifth Avenue in the opposite direction. The men of the 369th Infantry Division of the United States Army had returned home from the war. They had fought hard, losing hundreds of men on the battlefield. They had fought well, becoming the only American unit to win the prized Croix de Guerre from the French, who had dubbed the unit the "Hell Fighters."

The French knew these Americans well, because the regiment had been attached to the French Army—"owing to the need for replacements in French units," according to U.S. government documents prepared after the war. The truth, however, was more complicated. Four National Guard units fought with the French. The troops were black; the officers an interracial group headed in three cases by a white colonel. Only the Illinois regiment, the pride of African Americans across the United States because of publicity from the *Chicago Defender*, had an African American in command.

Combining these regiments with white units was unthinkable to American military leaders. Nor were these generals prepared to combine the African-American units into a fully equipped all-black combat division. With the French clamoring for replacements, American commanders loaned to their allies the men they preferred not to lead into battle themselves. Appropriately, the war heroes stepped uptown in American uniforms but in French drill formation.

The decision of the United States government to enter the First World War in April 1917 received a mixed reception among the American public. Many Americans opposed participation. Ethnic loyalties played a part in this opposition, as did criticism of European imperialism and a sense that Europe's troubles need not consume American lives or tax dollars. Many African Americans, questioning their role in a "white-folks' war," shared this skepticism. Most black voices, however, supported W. E. B. Du Bois's call for African Americans to "close ranks" behind the war effort. Military service, Liberty Bond purchases, diligent labor on the home front, and vocal support for the war would provide a basis upon

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which the black community could expect increased recognition and acceptance. As one black teacher in the South explained, his people were "soldiers of freedom. … When we have proved ourselves men, worthy to work and fight and die for our country, a grateful nation may gladly give us the recognition of real men, and the rights and privileges of true and loyal citizens of these United States." Democracy at home would be the reward for supporting democracy abroad.

The American military, however, had difficulty determining a potential role for black soldiers. First the army turned away black candidates for enlistment. Next, draft boards discriminated against black men seeking exemption. Grudgingly the War Department established a facility to train black officers, but the selection process weeded out many of the most qualified candidates in favor of men less likely to succeed. Black soldiers were "loaned" to the French army, whose officers were warned by American authorities that such men were potential rapists who had to be kept away from civilian populations.

In the end, 380,000 black men served, nearly half of them in Europe. Only 42,000 of these served in combat units. The rest were relegated to digging, cleaning, hauling, loading, and unloading.

Despite efforts to insult black soldiers and to remind black civilians that a war fought to "make the world safe for Democracy," as President Woodrow Wilson put it, did not necessarily mean making America itself any more democratic, African Americans drew their own lessons from the war. Writing in *The Crisis* in May 1919, Du Bois made the point:

> We *return*
> We *return from fighting*.
> We *return fighting*.
> Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America or know the reason why.

White Southerners wasted little time casting doubt on whether democracy had been saved at home. They lynched seventy African Americans during the year after the war. Ten of these were soldiers, some murdered in their uniforms. The riots of 1919 both punctuated this epidemic of publicly sanctioned homicide and dispelled any notions that racism and violence were unique to the South.

The riots also, however, provided a clue to an increasingly assertive sensibility spreading across black America. In some Southern cities the violence itself was sparked by white outrage at the sight of armed black veterans in uniform. In the North the riots were linked to the impact of the Great Migration, itself a statement of bold ambition and a commitment to a new role in American life. Everywhere the heightened tensions were related to an impatient mood working its way across black America. Black soldiers epitomized this sense of anticipation, this expectation that things were changing, that things had to change. Men who had fought for their country abroad had little tolerance for continued appeals to "wait" for recognition of their rights as citizens at home. This sense that they were entitled to the full rewards of American

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life combined with the ambition and excitement of the Great Migration to form the heart of what came to be called the "New Negro" movement.

The idea of the "New Negro" took hold in many influential black publications in the 1920s, and the term itself was used as the title of a book edited by Howard University Professor Alain Locke in 1925. In his introduction Locke proposed two complementary principles underlying this new perspective. New Negroes insisted on the rights embodied in "the ideals of American institutions and democracy." They also promoted "self-respect and self-reliance" among African Americans, with a distinct emphasis on race pride.

This perspective was not as new as Locke claimed. Instead it brought together strands of Booker T. Washington's gospel of self-reliance, deep traditions of African-American protest, ranging from abolitionism to the founding of the NAACP in 1910, and the hopes and aspirations underlying the Great Migration. What was new was a sense of expectation unequaled since emancipation and an odd combination of disillusionment, anger, militancy, and euphoria dramatized by the parades of returning veterans.

Nor was the New Negro represented by a single approach to African-American culture or the problems defined by the American color line. New Negroes moved into the arts and literature, social work and social activism, politics, the union movement, and a variety of organizations claiming to offer the solution to the dilemma of black life in a nation seemingly committed to white supremacy.

The most enduring expression of the New Negro was the literary and artistic flowering often referred to as the Harlem Renaissance. The term encompasses the work of a broad variety of novelists, poets, essayists, artists, and musicians. Their work displayed a diversity of form and content that defies simple categorization. Some, like poet Langston Hughes and folklorist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston, took street life or rural folk culture as their subject. This approach differed from older African-American literary traditions, which tended to emphasize respectability.

Others, like novelist Jessie Fauset, stuck with high culture and the black elite. Some explicitly protested against American racial oppression; others adopted racial themes but avoided overt political statements. What mattered, declared Hughes, was the inclination to write from inside the experience and to be true to one's creative muse.

By the 1920s Harlem had emerged as the cultural capital of black America, in much the same way that New York City stood at the center of mainstream American high culture. This was not an accident. The diversity of the population—a yeasty mix of New Yorkers, recent migrants from the South, and immigrants from the West Indies and Africa—played a part.

So did the efforts of Charles Johnson, an African-American sociologist who at the time was the editor of the Urban League publication *Opportunity*. Johnson, along with *The Crisis* literary editor Jessie Fauset, envisioned their journals as vanguards of social change. Through the publication of short stories, poems, and essays, and the awarding of cash prizes, these two journals promoted the work of Hughes, Hurston, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, and countless others. Perhaps as important, the journals also provided a bridge across which African-American culture could be presented to white audiences.

And indeed, white Americans did discover African-American culture during the 1920s. A

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small group of white political activists, literary figures, editors, and intellectuals read the books, went to art exhibits, and even donated money for literary prizes. Few tackled the more difficult work, like Toomer's *Cane*, a series of fictional portraits connected by poetic interludes. But then again, few blacks read *Cane* either; it sold only five hundred copies. Toomer's deft manipulation of literary form to explore the rural roots of black culture and consciousness would become a classic, but it would take nearly a half-century for it to be rediscovered.

Jessie Fauset's genteel aristocrats, every bit as proper as their white counterparts but not nearly as affluent, posed a different challenge. "White readers just don't expect Negroes to be like this," explained one white editor in rejecting her manuscript. The street hustlers of Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*, the love poems of Countee Cullen, the blues rhythms of Langston Hughes: These were easier. Charles Johnson's vision of a cultural terrain that provided a common ground for black and white Americans overestimated the interest of whites in black culture, history, or sensibilities. Whites were mainly interested in something called "The Negro," an exotic neighbor who was not bound by the narrow conventions of social morality.

It was not the literature or the art that brought white people and their money to Harlem or the South Side of Chicago. It was the nightclubs. White urbanites crowded into the clubs to listen to a new kind of music called jazz, which had emerged in the South earlier in the century. Some of these nightspots, owned and operated by whites, employed black musicians and chorus girls to entertain mainly white audiences who saw Harlem and its smaller counterparts in other cities as places where they could cast aside their inhibitions and enjoy exotic entertainment. Other clubs resembled Chicago's "black and tan" cabarets, where the white downtown theater crowd mingled with the black middle class. In some cities these integrated establishments were the most likely nightspots to attract police in the mood to enforce legislation enacted in the 1920s as part of the outlawing of liquor sales during Prohibition. Apparently alcohol was more dangerous when imbibed interracially. The appeal of ghetto glitz reached its apex at Harlem's Savoy Ballroom, where integrated crowds of up to four thousand danced to music provided by the most famous dance bands of the era.

Few of Harlem's residents, however, could afford the Savoy. The world of cabarets, concerts, and publication contracts that swirled around the notables of the Harlem Renaissance meant little to the majority of women who toiled daily as domestic workers, or to men carrying home a few dollars each day for pushing a broom or tending a machine. They caught their music at rent parties, all-night affairs in tightly packed apartments where a quarter at the door purchased food, drink, and live entertainment, with the proceeds used to pay the rent. Or they got music through a new phenomenon known as "race" records.

By mid-decade the strong economy had brought enough secure employment in most cities to permit many black families in cities across the country to purchase phonographs. After Okeh Records took the plunge in 1920 and issued Mamie Smith's *Crazy Blues* (which sold thousands of copies), other recording companies jumped into the market. Race records brought substantial profits to white record company owners. Black Swan Records, whose advertisements truthfully trumpeted "The Only Genuine Colored Record," enjoyed only brief success, in part because of its commitment to maintaining a catalogue of more respectable (but not profitable) classical music in addition to blues recordings.

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Sustaining an African-American voice in film proved more difficult. The first attempt came in 1915 with the establishment of the Lincoln Motion Picture Company. Noble Johnson, an actor with experience at Universal Studios, made the films in Los Angeles. His brother George took care of the marketing after finishing his shift at the Omaha, Nebraska, post office. They drew support from both communities, especially in Los Angeles, with its pair of African-American hotels, a black baseball league, an "African cafe," and an active NAACP branch.

Drawing on the emerging Watts ghetto for his screenplays, Noble Johnson sought "to picture the Negro as he is in his every day life, a human being with human inclination, and one of talent and intellect." George Johnson developed strong relationships with black newspapers, and Lincoln films were able to take advantage of the wartime migration to cities to build an audience.

The story of the Johnson brothers, however, also reveals the difficulties of black enterprise and the obstacles faced by African Americans committed to using the new tools of mass culture (at that time, radio, newspapers, and motion pictures) to provide honest depictions of black life. Lack of money and restricted access to distribution networks and credit undermined the company's ability to compete with white-owned film companies.

Nor did the Johnsons reach beyond a black audience; whites showed no interest in their films. The Lincoln Motion Picture Company folded in 1921. Another independent black filmmaker, Oscar Micheaux, would continue working through the 1920s and 1930s, but on the whole the film industry would be dominated by large studios turning out films with either no black characters or African Americans appearing in stereotypical and demeaning comical roles.

Surveying the state of black America in 1925, one young African-American scholar concluded that the business of producing culture was less indicative of the power and potential of the New Negro than the culture of the black businessman. E. Franklin Frazier, at the beginning of a long career as a distinguished sociologist, stated his minority opinion in one of the essays of Alain Locke's anthology, *The New Negro*.

He urged his readers to look beyond Harlem toward Durham, North Carolina, where African Americans owned thriving insurance companies and banks. "Durham offers none of the color and creative life we find among Negroes in New York City. … It is not a place where men write and dream, but a place where men calculate and work." His essay pointed to black economic dynamism, not cultural achievement, as the truly important change in the 1920s. Black financiers and businessmen along with a growing industrial working class would eventually merge black America with white America. When this happened race would cease to be important; what would matter was class.

A small group of young activists argued that class already was the division that mattered. The challenge was to convince black Americans that as workers their interests were best represented not by the middle-class NAACP and National Urban League, but by the labor and socialist movements, which claimed to speak for all workers. At the same time white workers would have to be convinced that black workers were allies, rather than rivals.

Calling itself the voice of the "New Crowd Negro," a new magazine called *The Messenger* was launched in 1917 by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen. Both men were college

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educated and had migrated from the South to Harlem. Their notion of a “New Negro” had less to do with culture than with politics—in particular socialist politics. Randolph and Owen opposed American involvement in the First World War. Dismissing the war as a battle among European imperialists, they tied the oppression of African Americans to colonialism in Africa (the political and ecomonic control of most of Africa by European nations) and to the oppression of the working class around the world.

Both union activity and socialist politics were becoming increasingly visible in African-American communities in the early part of the twentieth century. The leading black socialist of that time was probably George Washington Woodbey. Born a slave in Tennessee in 1854, Woodbey educated himself after the Civil War, despite less than two years of formal schooling. He moved to San Diego in 1903 (like so many other migrants, part of a family chain—he first went there to visit his mother), where he served as a minister and as a socialist orator and pamphleteer.

Woodbey’s visibility in the movement in some ways highlights socialism’s weakness among African Americans. He stood out among socialists for the attention he gave in his speeches to the relationship between racial oppression and class conflict, a link that many socialists either ignored or treated superficially. Although generally less committed to white supremacy than most other white Americans, the socialists seldom directly challenged prevailing notions about race. Moreover, Woodbey’s status as a minister was important. Most African Americans were likely to look within, rather than outside the black community for leadership—to their preachers, editors, business owners, lawyers, and educators.

By the end of the 1910s radical politics was developing deeper roots in some black communities, most notably Harlem. Hubert Harrison, a leading street-corner orator and Socialist party activist before the First World War, broke with the party in 1917. He proclaimed the need for a combination of black nationalism and socialism, with “race first” as the cornerstone.

Harrison frequently crossed paths with Cyril Briggs, founder in 1917 of the African Blood Brotherhood. Briggs described his organization as “a revolutionary secret order” dedicated to armed resistance to lynching, opposition to all forms of racial discrimination, and voting rights for black Southerners. He also sought the unionization of black workers and African-American control of political institutions in parts of the United States where they were a majority of the population.

The brotherhood also opposed American participation in the First World War and linked the struggle for black liberation in the United States to the battle against European colonization in Africa. The organization never grew beyond a few thousand, but by the early 1920s had expanded from its Harlem base to places as diverse as the West Indies and West Virginia. Like Hubert Harrison and George Washington Woodbey, the African Blood Brotherhood is significant because of its place in the broad range of African-American thought in the early twentieth century. It also is an example of the participation of black Americans in international debates about colonialism, politics, and race.

Organizing in Harlem for the nearly successful Socialist candidate for mayor in 1917, Randolph and Owen managed to attract thousands of black voters to the socialist banner. But

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success was short-lived and localized. In general the Socialist party failed to attract black voters, in part because it was unwilling to take a strong stand against Jim Crow.

The Communist party attracted few African Americans during the 1920s. These were mainly intellectuals impressed with its forthright stands against colonialism in Africa and racism in the United States. The party would win many black supporters for the help it lent to African Americans in civil rights and economic issues during the Great Depression of the 1930s. But in the 1920s attempts by the Communist party to organize black workers were so unsuccessful that A. Philip Randolph dismissed black Communists as a group that could meet in a phone booth.

Not that Randolph, Owen, or other African-American labor organizers had done much better. Several attempts had been made to organize unions with mainly black membership. All had failed, mostly because of resistance from white unions. By 1925, the *Messenger* was barely surviving after dropping from its peak circulation of 26,000 in 1919. Chandler Owen left to work for another publication in Chicago, and Randolph began to rethink his attitudes toward the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

The only route to black unionization seemed to be inclusion in existing labor organizations. The NAACP and the National Urban League had tried this route in 1918–19, urging black workers to join unions wherever they were accepted on an equal basis. But few unions would take blacks on an equal basis with their white members. In his earlier years as a radical Randolph had viewed the AFL as not only racist, but also too willing to accept the class structures created by capitalism. Now he decided that the AFL's approach to unionism—accepting the system and trying to secure workers a larger share of corporate profits—was the best way for black workers to move toward the standard of living that unionized white workers had attained.

Randolph began organizing an all-black union whose agenda resembled that of mainstream white craft unions: higher wages, job security, and collective bargaining. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids struggled against the Pullman company for a decade, winning partial victories in 1926 and 1929 and complete recognition in 1937. Despite considerable opposition and only after tireless insistence on Randolph's part, the Brotherhood also became the first African-American union awarded a full charter by the American Federation of Labor. Its organizing battles and its grassroots leadership would eventually provide the basis for a half-century of civil rights struggles in cities across the United States.

For most black Americans in the 1920s, however, unionization did not represent an option. The Harlem Renaissance was a distant phenomenon, not very important even to many Harlemites. What captured the imagination of the black masses was another movement rooted in Harlem, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). The organization was inseparable from its founder, chief spokesman, and strategist, Marcus M. Garvey.

Garvey founded the UNIA in 1914 on his native West Indian island of Jamaica, at the time still a British colony. He attracted little support for his organization and brought his vision of a liberated Africa and a fully emancipated black population to the United States two years later. That vision and Garvey's expression of it drew heavily on the rhetoric surrounding the First World War, which had been justified by the United States and its allies as a fight for "self-

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determination." Garvey compared his cause to that of the Irish revolutionaries fighting for independence and the Zionists struggling for a Jewish state in Palestine. His version called for the self-determination of Africans across the globe—"Africa for the Africans."

"A race without authority and power is a race without respect," declared Garvey. Criticizing the NAACP's strategy of seeking justice through lawsuits and legislation, he observed that "there is not justice, but strength." Blacks, therefore, had to compete. They had to establish independent nations in Africa, independent businesses in the United States, and a framework of black institutions independent of white influence.

The UNIA would provide that framework. Its newspaper, the *Negro World*, attained a circulation of fifty thousand to sixty thousand in the mid-1920s. Among African-American newspapers, only the *Chicago Defender* reached a wider audience. The UNIA established businesses, especially laundries and groceries, retail operations that could rely on a black clientele and employ UNIA members. Most visibly, Garvey founded the Black Star Line Steamship Company, funded by sales of stock to UNIA members. To buy shares was to invest in the race. Garvey promised profits, employment for black seamen, and transportation for African-American passengers traveling to Africa to lead that continent's struggle against European colonial domination.

At its height between 1923 and 1926 the UNIA counted more than seven hundred branches in thirty-eight states, in addition to a substantial body of support in the Caribbean and Central America. Some of these branches probably consisted of a handful of enthusiasts, or perhaps even a single household. Others, in large cities, numbered in the thousands. Perhaps most striking is the geographic diversity, as the UNIA ranged across country and city and from the Northeast to the Midwest, South, and Pacific Coast. The organization claimed six million members, but five hundred thousand is probably a more realistic estimate. At least another half-million supporters never paid dues but counted themselves among Garvey's followers. The UNIA was easily the largest African-American mass movement the United States had ever seen.

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The charismatic Marcus Garvey promoted racial pride and economic self-sufficiency for blacks. In 1919 he founded the Black Star Line to provide black Americans with jobs, transportation, and profits.

The moment, however, was brief. The Black Star Line was a financial disaster, due in part to bad luck associated with calamitous weather on its initial freight run and in part to weak management. The company's bankruptcy provided ammunition to Garvey's enemies, a list that included nearly all of the established African-American leadership. To radicals like A. Philip Randolph and Cyril Briggs, Garvey had too much faith in capitalism. To the moderates in the NAACP he was too inflammatory. Respectable middle-class community leaders found his advice to look to Africa for salvation as foolish (actually, this was a minor part of the Garvey agenda, but one that has remained most visible in the public mind).

Editor Robert Abbott of the *Chicago Defender*, an unyielding opponent of racism but a firm believer in American institutions, hated Garvey so much that he banished mention of the UNIA from his newspaper. His readers learned absolutely nothing about the active Chicago chapter, even though it had nine thousand members. In 1922 Garvey confirmed his opponents' worst fears. He attended a meeting of the Ku Klux Klan and declared that the Klan was more honest about race in the United States than the NAACP and other black organizations. At Abbott's urging Garvey was indicted for fraud in 1923 in connection with the sale of shares in the Black Star Line. Most likely he was less guilty of fraud than of incompetence. Nevertheless, he was convicted and jailed until his deportation from the United States in 1927.

Garvey remained a hero to thousands of black Americans, especially small businesspeople and working-class men and women. Years later Malcolm X would recall accompanying his father to UNIA meetings during the 1930s, long after the movement's decline. In his

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autobiography, he recalled the dozen or so people packed into a living room and was struck by

> how differently they all acted, although they were the same people who jumped and shouted in church. But in these meetings both they and my father were more intense, more intelligent and down to earth. It made me feel the same way. … I remember how the meetings always closed with my father saying, several times, and the people chanting after him, “Up, you mighty race, you can accomplish what you will.”

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