

## 'HELLHOUND ON MY TRAIL': RACE RELATIONS IN THE SOUTH

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On the eve of World War I, a black country preacher in Mississippi recalled his life in the South. He talked about three generations of his family. His father had been born and raised a slave.

He never knew anything else until after I was born. He was taught his piace and was content to keep it. But when he brought me up he let some of the old customs slip by.

The preacher conceded that in his own life, more often than not, he had accommodated to the requirements of the racial etiquette:

I know there are certain things that I must do, and I do them, and it does not worry me: yet in bringing up my own son, I let some more of the old customs slip by.

The son had attended school through the 8th grade, more education than any previous member of the family. He had been helping this father on the farm. But over the last year he had grown increasingly restless and discontent. This was the fast crop he would make, he told his father; once it was completed, he intended to leave for Chicago.

When a young white man talks rough to me, I can't talk rough to him. You can stand that: I can't I have some education, and inside I has the feelings of a white man. I'm goin'.

Even with the mechanisms of race control in place, an uneasiness and restlessness gripped the black South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The tension seemed most pronounced in the generations born in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They entered a deeply troubled society. Economic depression depleted the resources of tens of thousands of farmers, driving some of them into politics and agitation, more into poverty and indebtedness. Hard times had a way of bringing to the surface and exacerbating the larger concern, the enduring obsession of the white South - race, this time compounded by the specter of a new generation of black Southerners coming into adulthood, a generation born and raised in freedom.<sup>1</sup>

Within one decade, in the redeemed or "born again" South, African Americans had moved from a hopeful freedom to a circumscribed and inferior citizenship, from heightened to betrayed expectations. This was the world a new generation of blacks entered, the sons and daughters, the grandsons and granddaughters of the freed slaves. Every black child would come to appreciate the terrible unfairness of that world - the narrow boundaries, the limited possibilities, the need to curb ambitions,

1.U.S. Department of Labor, Division of Negro Economics, *Negro Migration in 1916-17*, Washington, D.C., 1919, p. 33.

to contain feelings, to weigh carefully every word, gesture, and movement when in the presence of whites. In this perilous world, Benjamin Mays recalled of his childhood in rural South Carolina, "if a black boy wanted to live a half-way normal life and die a natural death, he had to learn early the art of how to get along with white folks".<sup>2</sup>

The language and demeanor of blacks defined their "place", and whites were sensitive to any deviation from expectations. Personal security, then, lay in repressing any impulses toward individuality or assertiveness, in learning how to accommodate to daily indignities. Generations of black youths would come to share a common training and education based upon their early racial experiences. The first encounter tended to hurt the most, as it usually came with neither provocation nor explanation. Mary Church, born in Memphis near the end of the Civil War, simply could not understand why a railroad conductor had summarily ordered her out of the coach reserved for whites.

I could think of nothing that I had done wrong. I could get no satisfaction from Father, however, for he refused to talk about the affair and forbade me to do.

Five-year-old Benjamin Mays looked on in 1898 as a crowd of armed white men rode up to his father, cursed him, drew their guns, and forced him to remove his hat and bow down to them.<sup>3</sup>

"That mob", he recalled, "is my earliest memory". The first time she was addressed as "nigger" a Mississippi girl sensed only that the term made her an object of scorn and ridicule. She listened without satisfaction to her parents' elaborated explanation:

I could not understand my overwhelming sense of shame, as if I had been guilty of some unknown crime. I did not know why I was suffering, what brought this vague unease, this clutching for understanding... [T]here is a difference in knowing you are black and in understanding what it means to be black in America. Before I was ten I knew what it was to step off the sidewalk to let a white man pass.<sup>4</sup>

The public humiliation is what so many remembered. To experience such moments of truth was to be initiated into the racial mores and etiquette of the New South, to undergo the rites of racial passage - the "baptism of racial emotion", as Richard Wright remembered it. And for many that baptism came in the most vivid demonstrations of white chivalry and character - the terror visited upon black homes and families, often for no ascertainable reason other than to impress upon black men and women their powerlessness and vulnerability and the cheapness of black life. As a young boy in rural Georgia, Martin Luther King, Jr. saw a group of white men savagely beat a black man to death for being "sassy" - that is, for refusing to relinquish his paycheck. Audley Moore, born in the 1890's in New Iberia, Louisiana, would never forget her first lynching.

2. Benjamin B. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography*, New York, 1971, p. 22.

3. Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, Washington, D.C., pp. 15-16; Mays, *Born to Rebel*, p. 1.

4. Margaret Walker, "Growing Out of Shadow," in Dorothy Abbott (ed.), *Mississippi Writers: Reflections of Childhood and Youth*, 2 vols., Jackson, Miss., 1985-86, Vol. 2: Nonfiction, pp. 601-602.

I remember Grandma allowing us to look through the shutter and be careful not to open it too much, so they wouldn't see us. The black victim was being drawn by a wagon, his head bumping up and down on the hard, clay road, and behind him white men were hollering like wolves... [T]hat's a terrible thing for a child to see she recalled - and you grow up that way.<sup>5</sup>

If they calculated to make an impression on the black community, whites succeeded, but the impression often conveyed was not so much the superiority of whites as their enormous capacity for savagery and cowardice. "The lynch mob came", a Mississippi woman remembered. "I ain't never heard of no one white man going to get a Negro".<sup>6</sup>

The perceived absence of legal redress compounded the impact of these initial encounters with white violence. From the very outset of their lives, young African Americans came to learn that in the New South the distinction between justice and injustice, the law and lawlessness was so blurred as to be indistinct. If white children were inculcated from childhood with the image of the policeman as a friend and protector, black children learned to fear him as the enemy. The courts, lawyers, and judges were all implicated in the same perversion of justice: they existed not to protect but to repress blacks. Albon Hosley, who grew up in Mississippi at the turn of the century, recalled how he and his friends always lived in "mortal fear" of the police

for they were arch tormenters and persecutors of Negroes. I ran from policemen so often when I was a boy that even now [1929], though I am past forty, if one walks upon me unexpectedly my first impulse is to take to my heels.<sup>7</sup>

The indignities visited upon black youths were meant to impress upon a new generation the solidity of racial lines and the unchallengeable authority and superiority of the dominant race. Often with sadistic delight, whites would seize upon situations to torment black youths, not only to humiliate them but to underscore the limits of their aspirations and rewards. Harassment played upon racial stereotypes, forcing blacks from the earliest age to act out roles for the amusement of whites, to cater to their whims and desires, to undergo the rites of public submission.

Memories of these initial racial encounters shaped lives and outlooks. If they turned to their parents for comfort and support, the results were sometimes less than reassuring. The often ambiguous and tortured responses only served to reinforce the initial shock and confusion. Some children came to understand that parents were unable to answer their most insistent questions, and many began to sense the powerlessness of their parents in a white world, how little control black people had over their lives and destinies. For some parents, no doubt, the burden of providing answers was too much to bear. (More than a century after the Emancipation Proclamation, Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to describe the moment

when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park.<sup>8</sup>

5. Martin Luther King, Jr., with Clayton Riley, *Daddy King: An Autobiography*, New York, 1980, p. 30; Ruth Edmonds Hill (ed.), *The Black Women: Oral History Project*, 10 vols.; Westport, 1991, Vol. 8, p. 123.

6. Fannie Lou Hamer, "To Praise Our Bridges," in Abbott (ed.), *Mississippi Writers*, Vol. 2: Nonfiction, p. 323.

7. Albon Hosley, "Learning to Be Black," *American Mercury*, XVI (April 1929), p. 423.

8. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail", reprinted in Richard P. Young (ed.), *Roots of Rebellion: The Evolution of Black Politics and Protest Since World War II*, New York, 1970, p. 335.

Fear underscored the "place" of blacks in the South, conditioned their relations with white people, forced them to hedge their words and actions, affected posture and speech in the presence of whites. To maintain their supremacy, whites employed violence, intimidation, fear, ridicule, custom, and legal coercion. But they demanded of black men and women more than a forced obedience. Acquiescence by itself was not sufficient; it had to be convincingly given, a demonstrated, grinning contentment - acquiescence by inflection, gesture, and demeanor. It had been no less required of enslaved blacks. In freedom, as in slavery, the brooding, sullen, unsmiling, unappreciative black person, who displayed however dimly the worth of his or her own humanity, alarmed whites, made them feel uncomfortable and insecure. The grinning, laughing, obsequious black person comforted them, reinforcing both their racial assumptions and their self-esteem. The black minstrel painted the grin on his face. Richard Wright, among others, came to be impressed with the premium whites placed upon black deceit, how they encouraged irresponsibility". [T]heir rewards were bestowed upon us blacks", Wright recalled, "in the degree that we could make them feel safe and superior.<sup>9</sup>

The operation of the racial system in the lives of black Southerners rested on the daily reminders of their place: the deference expected of them in the presence of whites, the need to comply with the degrading racial etiquette, the gratuitous insults and humiliations, the Jim Crow signs that screamed at them from every direction, and for many perhaps the most difficult revelation to absorb - that color marked them as inferior in the eyes of whites, no matter how they conducted themselves, no matter how diligently they performed as students or workers, no matter what might be their social class:

We came to understand that no matter how neat and clean, how law abiding, submissive and polite, how studious in school, how churchgoing and moral, how scrupulous in paying our bills and taxes we were, it made no essential difference in our place.<sup>10</sup>

For black Southerners, there was never a purely economic way out of their difficulties: a fact white Populists in the late nineteenth century, like many white radicals, black leaders, and black editors in the twentieth century, failed to understand - or preferred to ignore.

The generation that came of age in the 1890s and the early twentieth century was once described by W.E.B. DuBois as a generation for which "War, Hell, and Slavery were but childhood tales".<sup>11</sup> Understandably, white Southerners carefully monitored this generation, and many did not like what they saw and heard. Although whites took pains to remind blacks of restraints placed on their freedom, the doubts and the apprehensions surfaced with every perceived change in the demeanor of blacks, with every reported incident of "sassiness" or "impudence", with every example of black assertiveness, with every story of a black person who had forgotten his or her place, who had permitted more of the old customs to slip by. And those stories by the 1890s were assuming an alarming regularity. "The new negro", warned a Georgia editor,

9. Richard Wright, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*, New York, 1945, p. 175.

10. Pauline Murray, *Proud Shoes*, New York, 1956, p. 270.

11. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, Chicago, 1903, p. 68.

"is killing the relation established by the old negro". The "grand old darky," lamented Mississippi's Senator in 1913, was being replaced by "the Afro-American", which means a good servant girl or a good farm hand spoiled".<sup>12</sup>

Between 1890 and World War I, even as many whites embraced the New South, they went to extraordinary lengths to romanticize and mythologize "the old negro", the rapidly disappearing Negro. They wanted to remind themselves of black loyalty and service in the past, to honor model Sambos - grinning, unresentful menials who still practiced the traits they had learned as slaves. "We know and remember, as our children cannot, the brighter side of Negro character", an Alabaman observed.<sup>13</sup> Newspaper tributes to the "old slavery-time Negroes", the publicity given in the press to reunions of former slaves with the families they had served, the statues and monuments erected to honor those who had stood by beleaguered white families in the War, literary embellishments of favorite Mammies, Aunties, and Uncles only begin to suggest the dimensions of an immensely popular and almost ritualistic white nostalgia. The fantasies of whites knew few if any restraints. For the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, Rebecca Felton, an outspoken Georgia racist and feminist, suggested that the Southern exhibit at the Fair feature

two darkies of the old regime... Everybody says it will be splendid. We don't want any educated negroes - simply the old ones who were real slaves - and contented.<sup>14</sup>

The idealization of the "old negro" underscored, even as it simplified and distorted, generational differences in the white mind. When whites talked about a New Negro, as they did periodically, more often than not they were confessing difficulties in keeping a new generation of blacks in their place. To listen to whites in the 1890s, the New Negro, born in freedom, was devoid of the habits of diligence, order, faithfulness, and morality taught by slavery: young blacks possessed neither the temperament nor humility of their elders, and they were said to be more restless, less deferential, and still worse, less fearful of whites. If most of them conformed to the prevailing racial etiquette, they did not do so with the same conviction; they did not play their roles with the same cheerfulness.

They don't sing as they used to - an Atlanta white woman told a northern visitor - You should have known the old darkeys of the plantation. Every year, it seems to me, they have been losing more and more of their carefree good humour. I sometimes feel that I don't know them any more. Since the riot [1906] they have grown so glum and serious that I'm free to say: I'm scared of them!<sup>15</sup>

The expressed concerns and fears of Southern whites about the sons and daughters

12. John Temple Graves, "The Problem of the Races," in *The Possibilities of the Negro in a Symposium: A Solution of the Negro Problem Psychologically Considered*, Atlanta, 1904, p. 30; *Washington Herald*, October 23, 1913, newspaper clipping in James B. Vardaman File, Mississippi State Archives, Jackson, Mississippi.

13. *Southern Society for the Promotion of the Study of Race Conditions and Problems in the South, Race Problems of the South: Report of the Proceedings of the First Annual Conference . . . at Montgomery, Ala., May 8-10. A.D. 1900*, Richmond, Va., 1900, p. 36.

14. Rebecca Felton, Palmer House, Chicago, to William M. Felton, March 15, 1893, Rebecca Felton Papers, University of Georgia, Athens, Ga.

15. Ray Stannard Baker, *Following the Colour Line*, New York, 1908, p. 28.

of the former slaves were not unfounded. Only a few, like a Robert Charles in 1900, chose open rebellion. But this generation manifested a restlessness, an unease, a quiet, grinless compliance that enabled fewer whites to talk with any confidence about the future of race relations. "The alienation is going on, widening, deepening, and intensifying", a white Southerner wrote in a national magazine. "The white man is losing his sympathy and the negro his feeling of dependance". No less alarmed, a Mississippi clergyman found in 1904 "great unrest and growing discontent" among blacks. "They are beginning to feel friendless and hopeless". The older blacks and whites, he observed, "with their peculiar attachments", were passing away. "Between the younger generation there are no such ties of sympathy; but rather, I fear, a growing estrangement".<sup>16</sup>

If whites encountered examples of black assertiveness - or equally alarming evidence of grinless accommodation - numbers of African Americans found it increasingly difficult to contain their feelings and emotions. Racial harassment and calculated debasement took their toll, and even as many blacks came to appreciate their vulnerability, many also needed to come to terms with their repressed rage - the felt power, rationale, and willingness to destroy white lives. Elaborate scenarios formed in black minds, sometimes shared with close friends, often harbored in confidence. After being thrown off a bus, James Robinson did not think about the rules of racial etiquette he had violated.

Revenge was my only thought I considered setting Lang's grocery store on fire. He had done nothing to me but he was white; Lang and every other white man was my natural enemy. I was a Negro and in their eyes this was my crime.

Richard Wright heard the story of a black woman who humbly pleaded to recover the body of her husband who had been killed by a mob. She knelt by his side and prayed, as a group of whites - armed and silent - watched her. Before they realized what was happening, she unwrapped a sheet and, shooting from her knees, killed four of them instantly. Apocryphal or not, the story impressed Wright as "emotionally true" because he had already come to believe "that there existed men against whom I was powerless, men who could violate my life at will". If he should ever confront a white mob, he resolved to emulate the black woman.

The story of the woman's deception gave form and meaning to confused defensive feelings that had long been sleeping in me... My fantasies were a moral bulwark that enabled me to feel I was keeping my emotional integrity whole, a support that enabled my personality to limp through days lived under the threat of violence.

Young Wright had not yet been subjected to the abuse of whites, verbally or physically, "but I had already become as conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings".<sup>17</sup>

16. Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South*, New York, 1984, p. 236; Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow*, Urbana, Ill., 1989, p. 6. On Robert Charles, see William Ivy Mair, *Carnival of Fury: Robert Charles and the New Orleans Race Riot of 1900*, Baton Rouge, La., 1976.

17. James M. Robinson, *Road Without Turning: The Story of Rev. James H. Robinson*, New York, 1950, pp. 41-43; Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, pp. 64-65.

The accommodation their parents and grandparents made to the racial order became itself a major source of irritation and questioning. It was impossible, for example, for Frances Mary Redgry to share her grandmother's professed affection for the white family she had once served: "My grandmother loved her master, and I never would have. She always found excuses". Benjamin Davis, Jr., the son of a prominent Georgia black politician and entrepreneur, found himself at odds with his father's accommodationist stance. "This question of blind respect for authority remained a matter of cleavage between my father and me, the dividing line between our philosophies of life". And Ned Cobb (Nate Shaw), born in rural Alabama in 1885, thought that his father, although legally free, remained "in his acts" and fears a slave. Over his father's protests, Cobb warned a white neighbor to keep his cow out of their corn crop:

I felt right then that I was a man and I begin to take on man ways, man acts, so far as right. I wasn't sassy and impudent to nobody, but I done got to the wrong age on me then to feel like it was right for folks to run over me or run over my folks.

When the Fisk University student newspaper asked in 1889, "Who Are We?", the editor answered emphatically, "We are not the Negro from whom the chains of slavery fell a quarter of a century ago, most assuredly not".<sup>18</sup>

The contrast between the "old time darkies" and the New Negro suggested to many whites the need to impress upon a new generation of blacks who had never known the discipline and the civilizing and restraining influences of slavery, who refused to believe what whites said about them, who had not learned to curb their ambitions, that there were limits to their aspirations, lines they dared not cross if they valued their lives. By the 1890s, when that first freeborn generation reached maturity, the need to regulate their behavior took on a new urgency. Custom and etiquette no longer provided whites with adequate feelings of protection; they were no longer deemed reliable mainstays of racial supremacy. With increasing regularity, especially in the towns and cities to which they were flocking, young blacks ignored the etiquette and violated the customs. The situation demanded vigilance. If black people had become a source of social danger and contamination, the need to control, contain, and quarantine them could hardly be questioned. A white resident of Memphis told an English visitor in 1909: "We whites have learnt to protect ourselves against the negro just as we do against the yellow fever and the malaria - the work of noxious insects".<sup>19</sup>

Between 1890 and 1915, the racial creed of the white South manifested itself in the systematic disfranchisement of African American men, in rigid patterns of racial segregation, in lynchings and legal executions that were little more than lynchings, and in the dissemination of dehumanizing racial caricatures. Disfranchisement - the use of the law, force, and economic coercion to deprive African Americans of the vote

18. Mill (ed.), *The Black Women: Oral History Project*, Vol. 1, p. 212; Benjamin Davis, *Communist Councilman from Harlem: Autobiographical Notes Written in a Federal Penitentiary*, New York, 1969, p. 38; Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*, New York, 1974, pp. 49-50; Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South. 1865-1890*, New York, 1978, p. 335.

19. William Archer, *Through Afro-America: An English Reading of the Race Problem*, London, 1910, p. 60.

- came to the South as a way to maintain white supremacy while reducing the self-esteem and political and social aspirations of blacks. The issue was not black political power. That no longer posed a serious threat. Nor was there any persuasive evidence to suggest that white and black farmers or workers might choose to substitute class for race consciousness and collaborate politically. That was never a serious threat, not even in the Populist movement that swept across the South in the 1890s. Whenever such collaboration did take place, whether for political or economic objectives, whites proved invariably to be unreliable if not treacherous bedfellows. The issue in the 1890s was how racial existence could be reconciled with the unquestioning domination of whites. Nor should blacks expect through education to be readmitted some day to the ballot. After all, one newspaper explained, "[We] do not object to negroes voting on account of ignorance, but on account of color".<sup>20</sup>

Custom and etiquette had previously defined social relations between the races. Between 1890 and 1915, the white South wrote those customs into the statute books. Jim Crow came to the South in an expanded and more rigid form in response to perceptions of a new generation of African Americans unschooled in racial etiquette, in response to growing doubts that this generation could be trusted to stay in its place without legal force, and in response to economic and social changes in the South which introduced many new sources of interracial contact and conflict.

Thirty years after the Civil War, Booker T. Washington articulated his creed of self-help. He grounded his advice to blacks on the proposition that material success would come ultimately to the hardworking, the sober, the frugal, the virtuous and the educated. W.E.B. DuBois, whatever his differences with Washington on other questions, articulated much the same position. But they were wrong. The experience of black men and women contradicted that fundamental assumption of the American Dream. Faithful adherence to the work ethic and to abstractions like democracy and equality brought most black people nothing: A lifetime of hard work, honesty, diligence, frugality, and punctuality might, in fact, leave them worse off than when they began. For most black men and women, the bootstrap did not work.

The obstacles African Americans faced were exceptional and formidable, shaped profoundly by deep-seated white fears and racial assumptions. Even as whites scorned black incompetence, they feared evidence of black competence. even as whites derided blacks for their ignorance, they resented educated, literate, and ambitious blacks.

We, the Southern people, entertain no prejudice toward the ignorant per se inoffensive Negro - an Alabama editor explained. - It is because we know him and for him we entertain a compassion. But our blood boils when the educated Negro asserts himself.<sup>21</sup>

It had long been an article of faith in the white South that an educated black man was subversive of good race relations. Education - like the ownership of land - spoiled the Negro as a laborer, developed in him wants that could never be satisfied, expectations that could never be realized. It simply made no sense to many elected officials to expend funds for the education of Negroes. "God made them negroes", the Governor of Georgia observed in 1901, "and we cannot by education make them

20. McMillen, *Dark Journey*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

21. Baker, *Following the Colour Line*, *op. cit.*, p. 242.



white folks. We are on the wrong track".<sup>22</sup> Nor did it make sense in an economy based on black sharecropping to educate that labor force, to make it knowledgeable of the simplest methods of calculating costs, prices, and rates of interest.

The assumptions of whites about the intellectual capacity of blacks all too often betrayed the fear that they might be proven wrong:

Reading and writing still bear watching, - a Raleigh newspaper noted. - When a negro learns to articulate correctly and say "they" instead of "dey" and "that" instead of "dats" we are prepared to expect the worst.<sup>23</sup>

A story blacks told made the point most forcefully. As he was leaving the railroad depot with a Northern visitor, a Southern white man sees two Negroes, one asleep and the other reading a newspaper. He kicks the Negro reading a newspaper. "Would you please explain that?" the Northerner asks; "I don't understand it. I would think that if you were going to kick one you would kick the lazy one who's sleeping". "That's not the one we're worried about", the Southerner replies.<sup>24</sup>

White fears ran deep on this question. The educated Negro was bound to become discontent, resentful, and dangerous. Frustrated in his ambitions, unable to achieve a social elevation commensurate with his education, the New Negro was apt to visit his resentment on the most prized possession of white men - their women. Denied the chance to prove his worth, warned a white psychologist, the Negro "will triumph over the other race in the person of a woman of that race. The crime of [sexual] assault is the crime of the 'New Negro' - not of the slave nor of the ex-slave".<sup>25</sup>

Even as Washington preached his self-improvement creed, evidence of black success was likely to provoke white resentment and violence rather than respect and acceptance. The prevailing racial code frowned upon exhibitions of black achievement that suggested an equal capacity. The more a black man owned, the more self-effacing and deferential he needed to act to appease and be tolerated by local whites. A black newspaper in the 1890s could only voice despair over the "daily examples" of white men singling out for harassment and murder "the black man who has something, who knows something and who stands for something".<sup>26</sup> The examples abounded. Few understood this better than Nate Shaw, the Alabama sharecropper. Through persistence and hard work, he managed to accumulate some property. But to keep the property was a continual struggle, demanding more resourcefulness and energy than he had expended to acquire it:

I had men to turn me down, wouldn't let me have the land I needed to work, wouldn't sell me guano, didn't want to see me with anything. soon as I got to where I could have somethin for sure and was makin somethin of myself, then they commenced a running at me...

22. A.D. Candler, Executive Office, State of Georgia, Atlanta, December 12, 1901, to Mrs. W.H. Rebecca Felton, Felton Papers, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

23. Raleigh (N.C.) *News and Observer*, November 17, 1906, in Hunter Scrapbook, Box 13 (1871-1928), Charles N. Hunter Papers, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

24. Roger D. Abrahams, *Positively Black*, Englewood Cliffs, 1970, p. 133.

25. John Temple Graves, "The Problem of the Races," and Willis B. Parks, "A Solution of the Negro Problem Psychologically Considered," in *The Possibilities of the Negro in Symposium, op. cit.*, pp. 21, 147-53.

26. Robert T. Kerlin, *The Voice of the Negro*, New York, 1920, p. 131.

That was because, Shaw explained, white people "hated to see niggers livin like people". A poverty - stricken black laborer was a more manageable laborer, a more manageable black man. For blacks to accumulate property or money was to make them independent, and whites feared the consequences. For some blacks, Shaw came to realize, the way to survive was not to accumulate enough to arouse white resentment and invite retaliation. The unsuccessful black man posed no threat; he knew his place. Shaw described his own father as such a man:

He had money but - whenever the colored man prospered too fast in this country under the old rulins, they worked every figure to cut you down, cut your britches off you. So, it might have been to his way of thinkin that it weren't no use in climbin too fast; weren't no use in climbins low, neither, if they was goin to take everything you worked for when you got too high.

Nate Shaw felt his brother had adopted that lesson as a way of life. "He made up his mind that he weren't goin to have anything and after that, why, nothin could hurt him".<sup>27</sup>

White farmers (known as whitecappers) terrorized black farmers off land they rented or had purchased with money they had saved; the more fortunate blacks lost only their lands and crops. The historical record, including the massive testimony in the archives of the Department of Justice, is replete with examples of violence and harassment aimed at successful blacks, those who worked land coveted by whites, those suspected of having saved their earnings, those who had just made a crop, those determined to improve themselves.<sup>28</sup> For blacks, it posed an obvious dilemma. To fail was to confirm white expectations, to succeed was to provoke white fears and hostility, to antagonize whites who deemed such success impossible for an inferior race and who feared and resented any proof to the contrary. No wonder many blacks came to believe that education and hard work would bring them only frustration and disappointment, that it was futile to work hard and obtain wealth and property because the "man" would somehow find a way to deprive them of their gains, whether by fraud, intimidation, or violence.

Accommodation and economic success guaranteed African Americans neither their civil rights nor their physical security. The quality of the racial violence that gripped the South between the 1800s and World War I made it distinctive. How many black men and women were lynched, beaten, mutilated, or quietly murdered in order to enforce deference and submission to whites will never be known. Conservatively, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, some two to three black Southerners were lynched, hanged, burned at the stake, or quietly murdered every week. The offenses which precipitated the violence had less to do with sex-related crimes than with questions of racial etiquette and economic competition - and in some regions,

27. Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, *op. cit.*, pp. 54d, 193, 27, xxi.

28. See, for example, J. Sternfeld, Montgomery Alabama, to W.S. Reese, November 12, 1903; George Randolph, Memphis, to Attorney General of the United States, November 3, 1904, May 9, 1905; R.M. Hanson, Galveston, Texas, to Attorney General, November 10, 1904; W.S. Reese, Jr., Montgomery, Alabama, to Attorney General, February 25, 1905; T. Brady, Jr., Broothaven, Mississippi, to Attorney General, May 9, 1906; Records of the Attorney-General's Office, Department of Justice, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

the assumption persisted that lynchings were necessary to maintain equitable race relations.

You don't understand how we feel down here, - a young Mississippian explained to a Northern visitor. - When there is a row, we feel like killing a nigger whether he has done anything or not.<sup>29</sup>

The quality of the violence - the extraordinary torture and mutilation prolonged for the benefit of the crowd, the ways in which mobs transformed death into a festive public spectacle - underscored the cheapness of black life, the degree to which many whites by the early twentieth century had come to think of black men and women as less than human. The record is clear enough. Newspapers never spared the details. The *Vicksburg Evening Post* described the lynching of a man and his wife by a mob of over a thousand people in Doddsville, Mississippi in 1904:

Luther Holbert and his wife, negroes, were tied to trees and while the funeral pyres were being prepared, they were forced to hold out their hands while one fingers at a time was chopped off. The fingers were distributed as souvenirs. The ears of the couple were cut off. Holbert was beaten severely, his skull was fractured and one of his eyes, knocked out with a stick, hung by a shred from the socket. Some of the mob used a large corkscrew to bore into the flesh of the man and woman. It was applied to their arms, legs and body, then pulled out, the spirale tearing out big pieces of raw, quivering flesh every time it was withdrawn.<sup>30</sup>

Why recite such details? Because all too few whites deemed them exceptional. To dismiss the atrocities as the work of crazed fiends or the lower orders of white society is to miss how terrifyingly normal these people were, the racial solidarity they displayed, the frequency with which lynchings took place in the most churchified communities, and the self-righteousness which animated the lynchers, the conviction that these blood rites were essential to maintain the social and racial order. The violence stamped itself on the character of the white community in a variety of ways. "I have seen very small white children hang their black dolls", a black domestic worker noted in 1903. "It is not the child's fault, he is simply an apt pupil".<sup>31</sup>

No master how many whites publicly deplored lynching and terrorism, the dominant racial views which fed the violence remained unchanged. Historians and teachers miseducated several generations of Americans, interpreting the past in such a way as to rationalize the South's denial of constitutional rights to blacks. The social sciences validated theories of black degeneracy and inferiority, providing scholarly footnotes to traditional racist assumptions and helping to justify on "scientific" grounds a complex of racial laws and practices. The same year Booker T. Washington proclaimed his philosophy of racial uplift at the Atlanta Exposition, *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, in its American edition, invoked the most recent scientific scholarship to assert that "the inherent mental inferiority of blacks" was "en inferiority which is even more marked than their physical differences".<sup>32</sup>

29. Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation*, New York, 1984, p. 187.

30. *Vicksburg Evening Post*, February 13, 1904.

31. "The Negro Problem: How It Appeals to a Southern Colored Woman," *The Independent*, Vol. 5, September 18, 1902, p. 2224.

32. Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden. 1898-1903*, Urbana, Ill., 1975, p. 2.

Popular literature, along with newspaper caricatures, the minstrel show, and vaudeville, depicted a race of buffoons and half-wits. And with "Birth of a Nation" in 1915, the cinema did more than any historian to explain the "Negro problem" to the American people, did more than any novel to impress upon Americans the dangers posed by a race freed from the restraint of slavery. Popular culture imprinted on the white mind the image of a race of buffoons, half-wits, and savages, a Negro who was sometimes comic, sometimes bestial, but in either case less than human.

With equal forcefulness, dehumanizing images of black men and women were imprinted on the white mind in the commercial products sold to white America, in crude caricatures and objects which exaggerated and distorted the physical appearance and lives of black people. The "picturesque" Negro was packaged and marketed as a suitable household or yard adornment: the hitching post, a lawn ornament in the form of a grinning black stable boy; the doll, milk pitcher, or ceramic cookie jar fashioned after the image of a smiling, heavy set, aproned and turbaned black mammy; the bottle opener in the shape of a gaping minstrel; the white haired, toothless Uncle Remus smiling on the label of a can of syrup bearing his name and his testimonial; the salt and pepper shakers in the shape of black children; the ashtrays in the shape of Ubangi lips; a children's bank, called "The Jolly Nigger," in the shape of a grinning black man, whose eyes rolled when a coin was placed in his mouth. Golly-wogs and pick-a-ninnies, Hammies, Aunt Jemimas, and Uncle Bens, crap shooting, minstrel tapping, watermelon eating, hallelujah - shouting black caricatures in the white mind.<sup>33</sup> "I am invisible", Ralph Ellison wrote, "simply because people refuse to see me... They see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed, everything and anything except me".<sup>34</sup>

Race relations in the South, a visitor reported in 1909, had become a "state of war".<sup>35</sup> It was a war black men and women were losing badly. The odds were formidable. The whites owned the law, the shotguns, the police, the judges and juries, and most of the land. And they wielded their powers ruthlessly and relentlessly. Who can say, in the end, what kind of violence took the largest toll in black minds and bodies, the crimes committed in the fields and streets by lynch mobs or the crimes committed in the executive, legislative, and judicial chambers by those pledged to enforce the law - the violence inflicted by the lyncher or the violence meted out by the landlord, the merchant, the banker, the judge, the sheriff, the newspaper editor, the educator, the politician, the scholar.

The black ideologues, the preachers, the editors, the politicians thrashed about with their manifestos, sermons, editorials, and programs. They spent much of their time reassuring whites that most blacks were lawful, orderly, and dependable citizens, and many argued that the causes of their plight lay within the black community. Most subscribed to the prevailing middle class success ethic and viewed themselves as worthy examples of self-help. The black press duly reported the news of black society and celebrated the achievements of self-made black entrepreneurs.

But to the great mass of Southern black men and women, that was another world

33. See, for example, *Ethnic Notions: Black Images in the White Mind*, Berkeley Art Center, 1982 and "Ethnic Notions: Black Images in the White Mind," film by Martin Riggs.

34. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, *op. cit.*, New York, 1952, p. 3.

35. Archer, *Through Afro-America*, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

- as alien in some ways as the white world. The great mass of Southern black men and women, trying to sort out their lives and prospects, caught up in a gathering despair, were far less hopeful; they sensed they had been done in. Ardie Clark spent her early years working with her parents in the fields near Covington, Georgia; the family worked "year in and year out", but remained trapped in a cycle of indebtedness. "The only thing that you would be thinking of", she remembered, was

that they were the ones that had everything... You felt all the time that they were taking advantage - you could see that.<sup>36</sup>

No matter how hard most African Americans worked and saved to lift themselves by the bootstrap, no matter how fervently they prayed, most remained trapped in an economic system that encouraged neither initiative nor hope. They went about the business of surviving. Remaining inoffensive in the eyes of whites became a way of life. The response of whites to the slightest deviation from accepted racial etiquette put every black man and woman on guard. "Had to lead a quiet life", a Virginian conceded. "Had to walk a quiet life".<sup>37</sup> For many, the "darker act", "mother wit" and guile remained critical techniques of survival, the techniques by which thoughts and emotions were masked - the posture of deference, the hat in hand, the down-cast eyes, the shuffle and scrape, the grin suggesting incomprehension, the fumbling words.

Whites had always claimed to know their Negroes; they had boasted in particular of the bonds of affection that tied the black servants to the white family. It seemed to David L. Cohn, a native Southerner who spent his boyhood in the Mississippi Delta, that "nearly all white Southerners" shared "a genial delusion" about Negroes: that because they lived among them, employed them as cooks, maids, nurses, and washerwomen, they intimately understood Negro life. But "the truth is", Cohn conceded,

most Southern whites have only the faintest comprehension of the inner lives of Negroes which remain forever secret and alien to them.<sup>38</sup>

The bluesman articulated that same insight in those classic lines:

Got one mind for white folks to see,  
'Nother for what I know is me;  
He don't know, he don't know my mind.<sup>39</sup>

Even as black men and women made their peace with the ruling race, even as they learned to accommodate, to mask their feelings in the presence of whites, many still found ways to impart meaning and dignity to their lives. If most accommodated, they did so from a sense of limited options, with an appreciation of limits, the enormous power wielded by the dominant society. But they did not necessarily submit.

36. Hill (ed.), *The Black Women: Oral History Project*, op. cit., Vol. 5, pp. 10, 23.

37. Interview with James Plunkett, a former resident of Virginia, in Spencer Crew, *Field to Factory: Afro American Migration, 1915-1940*, Washington, 1987, p. 12.

38. David L. Cohn, *Where I Was Born and Raised*, Cambridge, Mass., 1948, pp. 276-77.

39. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom*, New York, 1977, p. viii.

There were profound, psychologically significant differences between accommodation and submission, as Ned Cobb demonstrated so dramatically in his own life. He took insults. He knew to “fall back”. But he refused to become one of the “white men’s niggers”. He would not demean himself. He would not debase himself. He would not permit whites to define him:

I’d accommodate anybody, but I didn’t believe in this way of bowing to my knees and doing what any white man said do. Still, I always knowed to give the white man his time of day or else he’s ready to knock me in the head. I just ain’t goin to go nobody’s way against my own self. First thing of all - I care for myself and respect myself.<sup>40</sup>

Young Richard Wright learned to curb his impulses, speech, expression, and manner, but his senses “reeled in protest” when his uncle tried to teach him to grin, hang his head, and mumble apologetically when addressed. He found it impossible to accommodate to every whim of the whites, to all of their expectations.

While standing before a white man I had to figure out how to perform each act and how to say each word.

But there were limits. “I could not grin”.<sup>41</sup>

There were degrees of accommodation, and where and how black people chose to draw the line is very much a part of their history: the variety of ways, often subtle and not always easily ascertainable, by which they sought to influence the terms of their accommodation, the quiet heroism many of them demonstrated. W.C. Handy learned from his two grandfathers, both strong willed and resolute men, how

to submit to certain hard conditions long enough to fight my way out and yet be considered sufficiently ‘submissive’ by those who held the whip hand.<sup>42</sup>

Ella Thomas, a domestic worker born in 1908 in Alabama, made a point of informing her employers about the tasks she was willing and unwilling to perform: “I only gets on my knees to pray”. She had her limits, and she made them clear:

If you don’t never open your mouth for yourself, who going to talk for you? ... I didn’t have the advantage of education, but I could look and see that if I didn’t change something about my life, I’d be living just like my aunt lived - fearing the white, doing everything they say. Some people say, oh, you’re just independent, but I say I just figured how to get along the best I could.<sup>43</sup>

Excluded from the white world, African Americans sought refuge in their own institutions, their own schools, churches, and businesses, their own distinctive forms of expression, in their own increasingly separate world - a nation within a nation. Numbers of young blacks opted to live by their wits on the fringes of society, mostly in the cities and towns, where they would seek alternative ways to survive, often

40. Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers*, *op. cit.*, p. 545.

41. Wright, *Black Boy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 171, 138, 172.

42. W.C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography*, New York, 1941, pp. 3-4.

43. Susan Tucker, *Telling Memories Among Southern Women: Domestic Workers and Their Employers in the Segregated South*, Baton Rouge, 1988, pp. 88, 89.

outside the law, who managed to escape the ties of plantation, church, family, and work. From the late nineteenth century, in fact, black folklore and song accorded an increasingly prominent place to black desperados, outlaws, and killers, loners who had fallen away altogether from society, who were arrogant and defiant, who flouted the legal and moral code.

I'm so bad, I don't ever want to be good, uh, huh;  
I'm going to de devil and I wouldn't go to heaven, uh, huh,  
No I wouldn't go to heaven if I could.<sup>44</sup>

In life as in lore, most of these "rebels" forfeited their lives. But they remained defiant to the very end. On the scaffold in the last moments of his life, in 1890, black outlaw John Hardy was asked if he wanted to pray. He replied, "Just give me time to kill another man, Lord, Lord, Just give me time to kill another man". No less defiant, folk hero Stagolee, sentenced to 99 years in prison, told the judge, "Judge, ninety-nine ain't no goddamn time. My father's in Sing Sing doing two-ninety-nine".<sup>45</sup> If many blacks recalled such folk figures with awe, recounting the way they sneered at the customs and taboos and mimicked and outwitted the whites, they also remembered that the endings were invariably tragic. Charles M. Chesnutt, 22 years old in 1880, a teacher in Fayetteville, North Carolina confided to his journal that his generation was faring badly.

[O]f all the young men who grew up along with me, there were a hundred of them I suppose, three-fourths of them have died, have been killed by liquor, or by something... some from consumption...; some have been killed in drunken brawls.<sup>46</sup>

To appreciate the resourcefulness of the black response is to reassess the traditional ways historians document the past, to be sensitive to the diverse ways in which African Americans have conveyed their thoughts and experiences. It is, as Lawrence Levine has written, to enter a world in which the spoken, chanted, sung or shouted word has often been the primary form of communication. "How much history can be transmitted by pressure on a guitar string?" asked Robert Palmer. "The thought of generations, the history of every human being who's ever felt the blues come down like showers of rain".<sup>47</sup>

Nowhere in these decades did black Southerners pour out their concerns, frustrations and bitterness with such feeling as in the music they created. It was in these years, in the 1890s and 1900s, in the Mississippi Delta, for example, that a new musical form appeared. It could be heard on street corners, in store-fronts, in the train stations, cafes, and jook joints, at house parties and country dances, in the boarding houses, work camps, and crossroads stores. It was played and sung by men and women who disengaged themselves from the norms and values of conventional society, mostly poor and illiterate, loners most of them. Almost always on the move,

44. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, *op. cit.*, p. 408.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 410, 414.

46. Charles W. Chesnutt, Manuscript Journal II, entry for March 16, 1880, Charles W. Chesnutt Papers, Fisk University, Nashville.

47. Levine, *op. cit.*; Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues*, New York, 1981, p. 277.

they felt free than most and prided themselves on being masterless, on being able to enjoy a freedom of movement and expression denied most of their people, on being independent of a system that tied others to the land through violence, coercion, and the law.

The first blues performances astonished the audiences, as they were unlike anything most had experienced before - "the weirdest music I had ever heard", remembered W.C. Handy, who first heard it in 1903 in a Mississippi train station.<sup>48</sup> Some thought it frightening, unearthly, the devil's music. For many black families, in fact, the blues represented an identity they were seeking to escape. Intensely personal, often autobiographical, blues examined a diversity of topics and feelings: travel and drink, love and sex, color and class, death and despair, loneliness and loss, personal disasters and natural disasters (droughts, floods, and boll weevils), whoring preachers, sadistic sheriffs, and insensitive judges. The mood was sometimes that of a fatalistic resignation to life as they found it, as in Willie Brown's plaintive lament,

Can't tell my future, I can't tell my past.  
Lord, it seems like every minute sure gon' be my last.  
Oh, a minute seems like hours, and hours seems like days.  
And a minute seems like hours, hour seems like days.<sup>49</sup>

But the blues voiced toughness as well as despair, and its spirit is often best found in its stoicism and wit, its frankness and directness. The blues answered the need of a new generation to deal with personal betrayals, to work a lot of frustration, bitterness and disappointment out of their systems.

Blues - writes Greil Marcus, - grew out of the need to live in the brutal world that stood ready in ambush the moment one walked out of the church... Blues made the terrors of the world easier to endure, but blues also made those terror more real.<sup>50</sup> One may hear it in the chilling fantasy described by Furry Lewis, born in 1900, raised in the Delta:

I believe I'll buy me a graveyard of my own,  
I believe I'll buy me a graveyard of my own,  
I'm goin' kill everybody that have done me wrong.<sup>51</sup>

or in the bluesy dirge sounded by Charley Patton, born near Edwards, Mississippi in the early 1880s:

Ev'ry day seems like murder here  
Ev'ry day seems like murder here  
I'm gonna leave tomorrow, I know you don't want me here.<sup>52</sup>

48. Handy, *Father of the Blues*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

49. Willie Brown, "Future Blues," in Michael Taft (comp.), *Blues Lyric Poetry: An Anthology*, New York, 1983, p. 41, and on *The Mississippi Blues No. 1, 1927-1940*, (Origin Jazz Library, OJL-5).

50. Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock an' Roll Music*, New York, 1975, p. 33.

51. Furry Lewis, "Furry's Blues," in Taft (comp.), *Blues Lyric Poetry*, p. 169, and on *Furry Lewis: In His Prime. 1927-1928* (Yazoo Records 1050).

52. Charley Patton, "Down the Dirt Blues," in Taft (comp.), *Blues Lyric Poetry, op. cit.*, p. 211, and on *Charley Patton: Founder of the Delta Blues*, (Yazoo Records L-1020).



in the depiction of hard times by Skip James, born in Yazoo Co., Mississippi:

These hard times can last us so very long  
If I ever get off, this shit-ass floor  
I'll never get down this low no more.<sup>53</sup>

And how much history may be imparted in but two lines, in the desperation voiced by blueswoman Bertha "Chippie" Hill:

I'm gonna lay my head on a lonesome railroad fine  
And let the 219 pacify my mind.<sup>54</sup>

Eloquent black spokesmen in their own right - the bedeviled Robert Johnson, Preacher Son House, Pete Wheatstraw (The High Sheriff From Hell), Skip James, Ma Rainey, Charley Patton, Memphis Minnie, Tommy Johnson - yet absent from the dictionaries of American and African American biography and from the anthologies of American literature. To listen to them is to feel more vividly - more intensely than any mere poet, novelist, or historian could convey them - the thoughts, passions, aspirations, and frightening honesty of a new generation of black Southerners:

Well, I drink to keep from worrying and I laugh to keep from crying (*twice*)  
I keep a smile on my face so the public won't know my mind  
Same people thinks I am happy but they sho' don't know my mind, (*twice*)  
They see this smile on my face, but my heart is bleeding all the time.<sup>55</sup>

The blues gave expressive release to individuals caught in a marginal, disrespected world. So did black folklore and humor. With the Great Migration, many of the stories were reshaped in the North to deal with new realities. But a common theme remained; the betrayal of black expectations in a white dominated society; that when blacks played by the rules and did what white folks demanded of them, the results were pretty much the same. Few black speeches or editorials made the point more tellingly than did this tale, passed on in various versions from generation to generation.

After the Lord had created the Earth, he created the white man, the Mexican, and the Negro. So one day he told them, "Go out and get you some rocks". The white man, being industrious, went out and got a huge rock. The Mexican got a middle-sized rock, and the Negro, being lazy, got a pebble. Later on that evening, the Lord said, "I'm going to turn these rocks into bread". As a result, the white man had a lot of bread, the Mexican had a sufficient amount, but the Negro only had a crumb, and he stayed hungry. So the next day, the Lord again told them the same thing. This time the white man got a great big rock, the Mexican got a little

53. Skip James, "Hard Time Killin' Floor Blues," in Taft (comp.), *Blues Lyric Poetry, op. cit.*, p. 123, and on Skip James: *Early Blues Recordings*, (Biograph BLP-12029).

54. Bertha "Chippie" Hill, "Trouble in Mind," in Paul Oliver (comp.), *Early Blues Songbook*, London, 1982, p. 103.

55. Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues*, New York, 1960, p. 23.

smaller rock, but the Negro brought back a whole half of a mountain. That evening the Lord stood before them and said, "Upon this rock, I will build my church". The Negro said, "You're a motherfucking liar, you're going to make me some bread".<sup>56</sup>

The story suggests a perception of white America as unbeatable: an all too familiar theme in the black experience. To succeed is only to fail. There is no way to win, no way out.

"Few men", wrote W.E.B. DuBois, "ever worshipped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries". By the turn of the century, however, in the estimation of DuBois, "the shadow of a deep disappointment" rested upon his people.<sup>57</sup> For the nearly 8 million blacks who lived and worked in the South in 1900 (90% of the black population), the promise of freedom had been forcibly betrayed. The decision handed down by the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* confirmed what most black people already knew from personal experience: that the quality of life and freedom they could enjoy depended upon local option - the will of the majority of whites in a state or locality. The decision reflected popular opinion, scholarly thought, bi-partisan politics. Once a symbol of sectional strife, the Negro by 1900 had become a symbol of national reconciliation on the basis of white supremacy, a symbol around which white Northerners and Southerners could rally with equal fervor and conviction. When President Theodore Roosevelt wrote in 1906 "that as a race and in the mass they [Negroes] are altogether inferior to the whites," he articulated a belief embraced by most Americans.<sup>58</sup> And not even Booker T. Washington could fathom what happened in Atlanta in 1906 when for four days mobs murdered and assaulted blacks and plundered their homes and shops, singling out for special attention those who had adhered to the Washingtonian creed - the respectable, educated, property - owning blacks, the most industrious, the most law-abiding, the most accommodating. Thirteen-year-old Walter White heard the mob outside his house threatening to burn it down, shouting "It's too nice for a nigger to live in!"<sup>59</sup>

The question has often been asked. Could blacks in the South have been better served by more radical leaders, like a Henry McNeil Turner or a W.E.B. DuBois, than by a Booker T. Washington? It is not easily answered. The tenacious racism in the South, the indifference of most whites in the North, the cowardly silence and treachery of the Progressive presidents does not suggest an atmosphere in which radical protest would have made measurable gains: the more likely outcome would have been a race war blacks were certain to lose. Both strategies, both policies - accommodation and radical protest - demanded enormous and often complex sacrifices and commitments. Who can presume to know what most blacks who lived at this time were prepared to suffer, to sacrifice in the name of either strategy - agitation or

56. Abrahams, *Positively Black*, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

57. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, *op. cit.*, pp. 5, 6.

58. Theodore Roosevelt to Owen Sister, April 27, 1906, in Elting E. Morison et al. (eds.), *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, 8 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1951-1954, Vol. V, p. 226.

59. Walter White, *A Man Called White*, New York, 1948, p. 11. On the Atlanta riot, see also Charles Crowe, "Racial Violence and Repression in the Progressive Era," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 53 (1968), pp. 234-56, and "Racial Massacre in Atlanta, September 22, 1906," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 54 (1969), pp. 150-73.

accommodation? The ideologues preached their programs. But racial ideology, with Puritan values, espoused by powerless blacks, could easily be shown to be a parody.

As he boarded the train that would take him northward, to Chicago, Richard Wright thought about his 19 years of life.

The face of the South that I had known was hostile and forbidding, and yet out of all the conflicts and the curses, the blows and the anger, the tension and the terror, I had somehow gotten the idea that life could be different, could be lived in a fuller and richer manner ... True, I had lied. I had stolen. I had struggled to contain my seething anger. I had fought. And it was perhaps a mere accident that I had never killed ... But in what other ways had the South allowed me to be natural, to be real, to be myself, except in rejection, rebellion, and aggression?

As long as he lived in the South, he had been what his surroundings had demanded - "what my family, conforming to the dictates of the whites above them, had exacted of me, and what the whites had said that I must be". He would now take a part of the South with him, he said, and transplant it in alien soil, "to see if it could grow differently". He wanted very much to believe that America was larger than Mississippi. But Richard Wright would find what tens of thousands of other migrants had already found: that life in the urban North generated its own tensions, anxieties, and uncertainties. He would find that racial privilege knew no Mason-Dixon line, that racial injustice did not always manifest itself in lynchings, Jim Crow, or disfranchisement.<sup>60</sup>

The success ethic articulated by Washington persisted into the 1920s as race uplift. The journals and newspapers, the leaders and editors, the conventions and speeches still groped for answers, still insisted, as did one black journal, that "[T]he pressure of money power will stop lynchings quicker than all our oratory and protest meetings combined".<sup>61</sup> But in the South on the eve of World War I fewer blacks could keep that kind of faith: most struggled as best as they could and tried to suck whatever joy they could out of a bad situation. From the Mississippi Delta, bluesman Robert Johnson would articulate a lonely and terrifying sense of personal betrayal and anguish that transcended both time and region, a society impossible to overcome or to escape, and a new generation of interior exiles - exiles in their own land, empty of belief or hope, and combustible. There was no way to assimilate: there was no way to separate.

I got to keep moving, I got to keep moving  
blues falling down like hail  
blues falling down like hail  
Uumh, blues falling down like hail  
blues falling down like hail  
and the days keeps on 'minding me  
there's a hellhound on my trail,  
hellhound on my trail.<sup>62</sup>

60. Wright, *Black Boy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 226, 227, 228; Richard Wright, *American Hunger*, New York, 1977, p. 7.

61. *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 15, 1927, quoted in Ronald G. Walters, "The Negro Press and the Image of Success: 1920-1939", *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, Vol. XI, Fall 1970, p. 44.

62. Robert Johnson, "Hellhound on My Trail", in Eric Backheim (comp.), *The Blues Line: A Collection of Blues Lyrics*, New York, 1969, p. 223, and on Robert Johnson: *The Complete Recordings*, (Columbia C2R 46222).