

**“THE MONSTERS WE DEFY”:
WASHINGTON, D.C. IN THE RED SUMMER OF 1919**

by

DELIA CUNNINGHAM MELLIS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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David Nasaw

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Joshua Freeman

Date

Executive Officer

Carol Berkin

Clarence Taylor

Martha Hodes

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

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Delia C. Mellis

Adviser: Professor David Nasaw

This dissertation examines a race riot in the nation’s capital, one of the dozens of racial “clashes” instigated by white mobs that swept across the U.S. in the summer of 1919. That July in Washington, D.C., hundreds of white military men, soon joined by civilians, began attacking black citizens after weeks of sensationalized reports of black attacks on white women. Black Washingtonians were expecting violence; some had written letters to the city’s daily papers protesting the inflammatory headlines and warning that they would lead to violence. The city’s black newspaper, echoed by ministers and other leaders, exhorted black citizens to protect their homes and families.

Using both social history and cultural history methodologies, this study examines the riot in the larger context of racial violence, in particular lynching, and the African American experience of World War I. It offers a brief history of the nation’s capital, focusing on its substantial and relatively prosperous black population. The panoramic story of the riot is drawn from a combination of sources, while later discussion focuses on specific stories, investigating closely narrative content, context, and form in order to unpack the implications around race, gender and sexuality with which they are fraught. Black and white newspapers, government officials, civil rights activists, individual

citizens, a former president, and military intelligence agents all offered explanations of and predictions based on the Washington riot. My analysis traces contemporary evaluations, drawing connections among them and making suggestions as to their specific implications for American racial politics.

The black self defense of 1919 rose from a long tradition of resistance to white violence and fed in its turn the political and intellectual discourse which would find fuller expression decades later in the postwar civil rights movement. This riot represents a central and insufficiently examined aspect of racial formation in the U.S.; the long history of white violence and an emergent “New Negro” spirit met there in what many called “race war.” This study offers the first extended examination of this decisive event and its significance for contemporary American culture and consciousness, which continue to have race at the core.

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Not only did David Nasaw guide this dissertation with a firm and expert hand, always knowing exactly when and how much to push, encourage, criticize, and question, but it was thanks to him that I found the topic in the first place, long before I was ready to embark upon the long, long journey of researching and writing it. I discovered the D.C. riot while researching a class assignment for David, and it was he who identified it as a “terrific” dissertation topic. My boundless thanks go to him for that, and for his huge patience, his intellectual guidance, his generous, challenging, and stimulating questions, and his insistence that I let *chronology be my guide*.

Colin Palmer was my teacher and adviser when I first set out to write this dissertation. He taught me to analyze and question evidence, assumptions, and received wisdom like a historian, how to come back from failure with wit and focus intact, and how to stay with unanswerable but productive questions. I will always be glad of – and fortunate in – having had the experience of working with him, in and out of the classroom. Carol Berkin’s excellent critical insight, her encouragement and mentoring have meant a tremendous amount to my development as a historian. In her classroom and in dissertation groups around her generously laden dinner table, I gained important lessons about reading and responding to text, and about asking and answering questions which will always serve me as a student and teacher of history. Clarence Taylor’s reading of a draft of this dissertation was invaluable. He offered crucial questions at a critical juncture in the development of my thinking and writing. Even more, he introduced me to Harry Haywood, whose autobiography instantly became a vital document for me, and

whose experience overseas during the war both verified and deepened my understanding of the importance of the Great War to the story I am attempting here to understand.

Martha Hodes, whose work has been a guiding light for me from the moment I first encountered it, generously agreed to sit on my committee during a sabbatical break. Her mere presence intensified my motivation, and her feedback, like all her work, has been invaluable.

My experience at CUNY has been long and checkered, never easy and sometimes incredibly hard, but always rewarding. Through it all, Betty Einerman was there to rescue, answer questions, tell or listen to a story, laugh at a joke. But mostly what she does is take care of business, and I thank her for all she has done, unhesitatingly, graciously, and with an efficiency belied by apparent ease. She is a gem, and like countless others I'm ever so grateful to her. I have had a number of great teachers at the Graduate Center, among them Dorothy Helly and Ann Fabian, who modeled the energy, integrity, and intellectual rigor any aspiring scholar would be proud to achieve, combined with the wit, insight, and compassion of a feminist pedagogy (though they might not call it that) which I hope to carry forward in my own teaching.

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When I started graduate school I already had a substantial network of friends to rely upon, to keep me busy, to complicate and enrich my life. But immediately upon starting classes at the Grad Center, I gained a new community, my “little school friends.” As lucky as I’ve always been with friends, I could never have hoped for such colleagues, who know so much and are so smart, who have so much wit, and heart, and soul. I have learned as much from talking about books and writing, from struggling, celebrating, mourning, and just sitting around drinking with Cindy Lobel, Terence Kissack, Erica Ball, Kathy Feeley, Megan Elias, and Peter Vellon as I have from reading books and going to classes. Without Cindy to guide and inspire me in matters both mundane and transcendent I would long ago have drowned – and not just in the Great Lakes. On day one of my first class at the Graduate Center Terence simultaneously tickled, intimidated, and encouraged me, and he has continued to do so ever since. As a partner in study, disaster, and triumph, Erica has been a rock. Kathy’s fire and her brains are an everlasting inspiration, while one could not wish for a more accomplished doppelganger to emulate than Megan. Peter is a reliable reminder of what’s really important in life – a good laugh, preferably at one’s own expense. Jeffrey Trask, an honorary CUNY student, joined our number a few years ago, luckily for all of us. As the last of us to finish this process, I truly could not have done it without them – not just because of the hours spent working together in libraries and living rooms, nor the help and insight they gave by reading and critiquing draft sections of this document, nor even the inspiration and spur of seeing them all get through it, but because they have taught me how much there is to gain from having colleagues who are also, and primarily, true friends. As Tyler Schmidt and I walk

these last steps together, I am grateful yet again for CUNY's apparently endless supply of brilliant, witty, and supportive scholars.

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INTRODUCTION

“Honor The Race Riots”¹

From the very inception of the Republic to the present moment, race has been a profound determinant of one’s political rights, one’s location in the labor market, and indeed one’s sense of “identity.” The hallmark of this history has been *racism*, not the abstract ethos of equality....²

Between April and October of 1919 the United States went into convulsions of racial violence in cities and towns across the nation. This dissertation looks at a riot in the nation’s capital in that notoriously chaotic and violent year. I have chosen to investigate this riot because besides being a rich, interesting, and untold story, it is crucial to understanding a larger narrative: the development of the twentieth century U.S. city. Beyond this, I believe we can use the Washington riot to examine a significant moment in U.S. race relations, a moment that is largely overlooked, unnoticed, perhaps even passively denied. This moment is emblematic of a crucial and similarly elided truth about the extent to which racial violence has shaped U.S. history and culture, and thus American identities – across lines of color, class, and region.

Between April and October of 1919 there were at least 25 episodes of mass racial violence in cities and towns across the United States. Some were riots like the ones in D.C., Chicago, Charleston, Omaha, and Elaine, Arkansas, but there were also other kinds of incidents. The New York *Times* listed “race clashes” in twenty-nine other cities, including locations in the Northeast, the Midwest, and the deep South. In at least one town, Corbin, Kentucky, all the African American citizens were expelled on pain of

¹ “Reaping the Whirlwind,” editorial, *Chicago Defender* 8/2/1919.

² Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States From the 1960s to the 1990s*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 1.

death, never to return. In addition to these clashes, by early October forty-three black men had been lynched in the U.S., eight others burned at the stake.³ James Weldon Johnson, writer, speaker, and civil rights activist, dubbed those months the “Red Summer,” a sobriquet which referred not to the contemporaneous anticommunist hysteria, but to all the blood shed by victims of the year’s fighting. Dozens of people died, countless more were wounded, saw their homes and neighborhoods destroyed, or were terrorized in myriad other ways.

Why all these explosions in such a short period? What was happening in the nation to bring its perpetual racial tension to the bursting point so many times, in such wildly different contexts? Part of the answer probably lies in the fact that there were other kinds of trouble erupting all over the place at the same time. There were over three thousand strikes in the U.S. in 1919 alone; some of them involved serious violence. Though there was a similar number of strikes across the nation in surrounding years, the strikes of 1919 involved larger numbers of people than in any preceding years. But labor strife per se is not the subject here, though some – perhaps even most – of the racial violence of 1919 (and other years) was directly linked to anxieties about work, competition for jobs, and histories of race-based hiring or exclusion from certain jobs and sometimes entire industries. In his 1919 discussion of Chicago’s Red Summer riot, Carl Sandburg said that “In any American city where the racial situation is critical at this moment, the radical and active factors probably are (1) housing, (2) politics and war psychology, and (3) organization of labor.”⁴ This was certainly true in Washington, though very differently than in cities with a more industrial orientation. But Sandburg’s

³ “For Action on Race Riot Peril,” *New York Times* 10/5/1919; on Corbin, see Elliot Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

⁴ Carl Sandburg, *The Chicago Race Riots*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1969), 6.

second item is where my examination will focus, for reasons that I hope will become clear.

The year 1919 is famous for turbulence all over the world. Europe, struggling to recover from a devastating war and flooded with millions of refugees, was riven by postwar revolutions.⁵ In places as disparate as Argentina and China revolutionary student movements were erupting while leading Indian nationalists “fell under [the] spell” of revolutionary Marxism. Mexicans who had achieved their own revolution in 1917 looked to revolutionary Russia as a natural ally; Cuban tobacco workers formed “soviets”; across Latin America revolutionary Marxist leaders and parties began to emerge.⁶ These international developments were not lost on people in the U.S., neither government officials nor ordinary citizens. To the contrary, they helped feed another 1919 phenomenon, the first red scare, which had ordinary people worrying whether there were Bolsheviks lurking around every dark corner. It also had them subject to surveillance and – if they were part of groups which to government officials seemed questionable or threatening – investigation and raids by federal agents. Meanwhile, mysterious bombers delivered some 45 explosive devices to government officials and prominent businessmen. Only one person was killed in this rash of actual or planned explosions, but their consequences were extensive. The government action they fueled, and the fears that action relied upon, had a profound effect on American politics and political discourse, civil rights, and even, one might argue, on the national identity, if such a thing exists.⁷

⁵ As many as five million people were displaced by the combination of the world war, the Armenian genocide, “exchanges of populations”, and the Russian revolution (Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* [New York: Vintage Books, 1996], 51).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷ Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., *Seeing Red: Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 5.

World War I had devastated much more than the lands upon and bodies with which it was fought. The war's destructive innovations led to an unprecedented loss of life and new, horrifying injuries. Further, it did overwhelming damage to the psyches of the soldiers who survived it, their fellow citizens, and even their political leaders. The war recast Europe not just in terms of political boundaries: cultural, philosophic, and artistic certainties were undone and remade as well. When we look at the U.S. in the aftermath of this experience, and especially since our focus will include some of those who actually fought in this "Great War," we must attend to its interior effects if we can. Finally, and by no means least significantly, the war was a powerful factor in the events and dynamics enumerated above – labor conflict and the red scare.

Nevertheless, all this strife serves primarily an environmental rather than a directly causal function for the particular episode of racial violence we will examine. This is not to say that what we will look at was unconnected to or unaffected by the First World War, subsequent domestic labor strife, or revolutions around the world and the hopes and fears they inspired, especially in terms of the federal policing apparatus. Quite the contrary indeed, and in the ensuing pages I spend a great deal of ink and energy in my endeavor to point out and elaborate those connections as I see them at work, and to acknowledge in ways I hope are useful the larger environment of anxiety and trouble they created.

But racial violence has its own history in the U.S., and it is that history and its effects which I will argue were the most significant factors in the riot in Washington, D.C. The same may not be equally true for other Red Summer riots, at least not to the

same extent.⁸ This brings us to another reason for and notable aspect of looking at the nation's capital rather than one or more of the other Red Summer sites. In part the reason is almost too obvious: as the capital, Washington literally stands for the U.S. and it makes sense to look at a national trend through the lens of the national city. This rationale only works to a point however, because Washington is not, and has never been, like any other city in the nation and it cannot be seen as directly representative in the sense of an example, or a statistical sample. Nevertheless, it is the capital, and in 1919 Americans looked to it as the symbolic center of the nation; events in Washington played on a national stage, were a national reference point, and had ramifications across the country.

Furthermore, the capital had a special significance for African American citizens in this period. In the early decades of the century D.C. “was the center of Negro society, and the social status of the Negro there had been unequalled anywhere else in the country.”⁹ The capital city had been a primary destination for black migrants out of the rural South from its earliest days. Of course, that was changing by 1919, when Harlem was well on its way to supplanting D.C. as both mecca and touchstone for African Americans.¹⁰ And during the war thousands of African Americans made their way north to jobs newly open to them in Chicago and other industrial cities – indeed, that very migration was a central factor in the Red Summer fighting in many such places, Chicago perhaps most spectacularly. Washington, on the other hand, was a wartime destination for

⁸ Cities like Chicago and Omaha, for instance, were much more substantially affected by wartime black migration than D.C. and industrial labor issues were more directly connected to the outbreak of violence.

⁹ From a 1955 interview with Du Bois (paraphrasing him). Kathleen Wolgemuth, “Woodrow Wilson and Federal Segregation,” *Journal of Negro History*, (April 1959), 170.

¹⁰ Jacqueline Moore, *Leading the Race* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 1. Of course, there were those who pointed to the “colored Vanity Fair” of D.C. as a negative rather than positive model for African Americans (Moore, 9, *passim*).

more southern whites than blacks. That white influx was in fact a significant factor in the city's growing racial tension.

A major demographic transformation began in the U.S. during the First World War. The African American population began to transition from mostly rural to urban environs. And so U.S. cities were in the early phase of a consequent change, which would be mostly complete soon after mid-century. But for many African Americans in 1919, Washington was still the "Athens of colored America," as one member of the black elite called it.¹¹ Quite simply this was because the capital had long held the nation's largest, most influential and prosperous black population.¹² Though African American numbers were rapidly climbing in other cities, D.C. continued to be home base for the majority of the African American elite, which was made up in large part of families which had been free and prosperous for generations predating the Civil War. Likewise, it was bedrock to the black intellectual elite which had its base at Howard University and in the African American professional and educational organizations headquartered in the capital. The capital was, and had long been, a mecca for middle class, striving, and working class African Americans as well. Its relative richness of educational, occupational, and commercial opportunities made it a magnet for black people throughout the nineteenth century; the Civil War and Emancipation made that pull more intense. This cultural centrality made events in Washington more significant, and so although – or perhaps because – the specific causes and to some extent the consequences of the Red Summer

¹¹ Roscoe Conkling Bruce to Archibald H. Grimke, 12/7/1922, folder 87, box 4, Archibald Grimke Papers, MSRC.

¹² As a percentage of the population though not in absolute numbers. See James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

riot there were substantially different from others, it provides particularly rich ground for analysis and interpretation.

The city's distinctive history and circumstances did not mean that the D.C. riot was unconnected to the riots in other cities; quite the opposite, of course. But the forces at work in the summer's violence manifested differently in the capital for a number of important reasons, which this dissertation will examine at length. One of the most important factors in the explosion of racial violence during those months of 1919 was the rise of the New Negro. The idea of a "New Negro" had been appearing for decades in the literature and rhetoric of African Americans, described with a variety of characteristics according to the political or social agenda of the speaker. In his 1916 book *The New Negro*, William Pickens articulated a "philosophy of protest, race pride, and cultural achievement." In its various iterations the New Negro would echo in the thought, writing, and speech of black leaders and individuals with views ranging from the militant socialism of A. Philip Randolph to the black nationalist/separatist capitalism of Marcus Garvey for years.¹³ In the years surrounding 1919, New Negro thinking could be generally characterized as resting on a rhetorical and ideological base of manhood and race pride, which held social, political, and economic assertion as imperatives, no matter how diverse the specific political, moral, or social philosophies of its various proponents, nor how sharply they disagreed with one another.

Another specific articulation of race pride in this period related to the idea of the New Negro was the idea of the "race man" and the "race woman," who put "the race" first, and who saw and intended all their efforts and achievements to be focused on and

¹³ It may have appeared first in 1895, in an editorial in the *Cleveland Gazette*. (Colin Palmer, *Passageways: An Interpretive History of Black America*, vol. II, 1863-1965 [Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1998], 142).

dedicated to the betterment of the race as a whole. By extension their works were also to reflect well on the race, so there was a strong reformist and leadership aspect to the idea as well, related to Du Bois' idea of the Talented Tenth and to an extent to the Best Men and Women concepts that Glenda Gilmore discusses in *Gender and Jim Crow*.¹⁴ In each of these modes of thought gender spheres were, at least rhetorically, very separate. Of course quite often the lived experiences of many people, especially women, followed trajectories which frequently crossed outside the bounds of the gender prescriptions and proscriptions articulated in that rhetoric.

Chapter One of the dissertation looks at the immediate background of the Red Summer, chronological and otherwise. The chapter outlines what I understand to be the key aspects of the history of racial violence, particularly lynching, which laid the groundwork for the racial tumult of 1919. It looks closely at the social and political developments of the preceding decade or so: black migration out of the South; the ascendance of a more assertive black politics which focused on the demand for civil rights and the concept of the New Negro; the intensification of racial violence in and out of the South. The chapter looks at all these things refracted through the lens of World War I, which I argue had a profound effect on the lives and thinking of African American citizens, soldiers and civilians alike.

In Chapter Two I offer a selective history of Washington, D.C., focusing on but not limited to the history of African Americans in that city. The chapter begins with the establishment of the capital, showing that its founders hoped it would function as the

¹⁴ Glenda E. Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 62-63; 75-76, passim.

symbolic center of the nation, a purpose it has actually filled to a considerable extent, not least for African Americans. I argue that it is paradoxically Washington's very uniqueness, its fundamental distinctiveness from other cities which allows it to be emblematic of the nation. One of the primary ways in which D.C. has reflected the nation has been through the perpetual centrality in that city of questions and difficulties around race. The chapter looks closely at issues of race in the city during the Wilson administration and during the war, as tensions mounted over jobs and housing, and over the city's cultural landscape and future.

Chapter Three describes chronologically the events of July 19th through the 25th, 1919, after growing tension in the city exploded into violence. I rely heavily on newspaper accounts, which offer the most extensive and detailed picture of what happened. I also draw on other kinds of evidence, however, including reports produced by members of the Military Intelligence Division of the War Department; affidavits given by individuals to members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for its investigation; both official and internal reports and communications produced by officials of the latter organization; letters to the editors of assorted publications; and a variety of secondary sources, including a 1926 Master's thesis written by a Howard University student who doesn't generally cite his primary sources, but who I assume gleaned at least some of his evidence from eyewitnesses. The chapter attempts to describe the big picture as well as individual incidents, and I offer some critical contextual analysis of the language and general presentation of various accounts.

In Chapter Four I look at four individual experiences of the riot. Each of the episodes exposes an important aspect of the riot and how contemporary actors understood it. In the first, Carrie Johnson, a young African American woman, shot and killed a white police officer after he broke into her home in pursuit of a sniper shooting out the window at white rioters. This story and the reaction to it are almost entirely drawn from white and black newspaper accounts and discussions. The second episode is derived from a report sent by officials of the D.C. branch of the NAACP to Field Secretary James Weldon Johnson. The text describes a meeting with city officials where the men both urged those officials to make sure there was police protection against the mob for black Washingtonians and warned them that the latter were more than ready to protect themselves if necessary. The third story appeared as a letter to the editor of the *Nation* magazine soon after the Washington riot. Written by a white woman, Dr. Evelyn G. Mitchell, the letter describes her experience after she decided to set out into a black neighborhood one night after several days of rioting, to see for herself what was happening and to offer her sympathy and support to any African Americans she found in the streets. This text offers not only an alternative description to what the newspapers showed, but also a fascinating, complicated glimpse into the mindset of one exceptional white Washingtonian during the riot. The final section of the chapter looks at the *Washington Post's* depiction of a different white Washingtonian woman, the widow of the police officer shot by Carrie Johnson. I argue that the story of this young woman was designed, consciously or not, to echo the depictions of white women as the victims of black male attackers which appeared with strident, alarmist headlines, in the pages of the city's white papers for weeks and months leading up to the riot. Focusing through the

immensely popular and controversial film, *The Birth of a Nation*, which had premiered in 1915, I use the figure of Mrs. Wilson to look at the rape story and how it functioned not just in Washington, D.C. in 1919 but in the U.S. in this period. Taken together, these texts, each fascinating and complicated on its own, offer a variegated picture of the interweavings of race and gender as they played out in the riot as it happened, and in how people told and interpreted the stories of the riot.

Chapter Five examines the efforts of contemporaries to explain the causes and consequences of the riot. It looks mostly at stories, features, editorials, and essays that appeared in newspapers and other periodicals, white and black, around the nation in the days and weeks immediately following the riot in the capital. Because other riots were exploding during these days and weeks, many of the discussions naturally connect events in D.C. to other such outbreaks. There was of course a wide range of interpretations for why and how these things were happening, and for what ought to be done; though the chapter moves chronologically, I attempt to connect the various voices to each other as much as possible, rather than simply listing the responses as they appeared. I attempt to analyze each text on its own terms but also to understand them in conversation with one another and in connection to other discussions also going on at the time.

Scholars across the disciplines generally agree that race and gender are categories of social rather than biological organization. Nevertheless they have retained their power as markers of identity and of social (and political and cultural) reality in large part because of their fundamental characteristic: the appearance of reality, of fixity and inherence. It is paradoxically the very contingency and inconsistency, the liquidity of race

and gender as concepts which allows them to persist with such force, to continue to seem *real*. This dissertation looks closely at the articulation of various ideas about race and gender by and through historical actors. Because these ideas, this way of organizing their thinking about themselves and others was so important to them, and because gendered and racialized language was so common, and yet so slippery in its meanings, I have found it necessary to attend closely to its expression. The language of manhood and womanhood, almost always racialized, was so commonplace as to begin to seem almost meaningless, because so versatile; consequently, and perhaps perversely, it demands a great deal of attention. As with the discourse of “civilization,” individuals and groups with opposing agendas could use sometimes identical language to espouse or decry, to celebrate or deplore entirely different actions, individuals, and programs. Though widely and disparately used, this language was far from empty and it certainly expressed the beliefs of those who used it. Thus the necessity to examine such language closely, to try to interpret it in context, to connect it with actions and intentions.

A few more words on language. Scholars who look at these kinds of events struggle with terminology, and many are uncomfortable with the term “race riot,” for a number of reasons, mostly I believe having to do with connotations arising from the black urban “rebellions” of the late sixties. Also, so much of the mass racial violence in U.S. history was instigated by whites and very often would be more accurately termed as “massacre,” or even, borrowing from Eastern Europe, “pogrom.” This is not to say that the targets of this violence universally or even usually failed to fight back, but rather that whatever resistance they mounted was usually overcome, by force of numbers, firepower, or perhaps simply murderous will. The idea of “riot,” which seems to have a connotation

of generality that “massacre” and “pogrom” lack, implying as they do mostly one-way violence, seems to fit only a minority of cases, where the fighting was more generalized.

I usually use the word “riot” in this dissertation to talk about the violence that erupted in the national capital in 1919.¹⁵ This is because after the initial white explosion the fighting was in fact general. African Americans absolutely fought back, and were largely successful. One of the important distinguishing factors about D.C. was the success of black resistance to white mobs, who – as was usually if not always the case – initiated the fighting. As a speaker at a mass meeting in Washington in the wake of the riot announced, “Between mob violence and race riots, I prefer race riots. In mob violence one party laughs while the other cries; and in race riots both parties may cry.”¹⁶ Implicit in his statement is the idea that “mob violence” is perpetrated by one group upon another, and that a race riot is a more evenly matched confrontation.

Some of the fighting in D.C. did not involve large numbers of people fighting in the streets all at once, but rather isolated battles between smaller groups of people. However, taken together, all the fighting and the feeling about the fighting in Washington support the use of the word “riot” for what happened, and contemporary accounts uphold this usage. One further note. At least one scholar offers a solid argument for the term “white riot,” which seems more accurate in one sense because, again, whites did generally initiate the fighting, and usually constituted whatever mobs were in force as mobs.¹⁷ But in 1919 in Washington black people took mass action in response to the

¹⁵ There were, as I have said, racial “clashes” in some places that summer which were not riots.

¹⁶ Walter H. Loving, “Condition Among Negroes in Washington,” memo to Director of Military Intelligence, 8/10/1919, “Negro Subversion” file, 10218-350, RG 165, National Archives.

¹⁷ Sheila Smith McKoy, *When Whites Riot: Writing Race and Violence in American and South African Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001). In a discussion that arises in part out of the fundamental insight of so-called “whiteness studies,” i.e. that whites also have “race,” and that this reality has been ignored and avoided until very recently, McKoy argues that in media portrayals and historical

white mobs. Perhaps if so many people were not still struggling to understand and accept that the idea and terminology of “race” apply as much to white people as to any others, “race riot” would be a perfectly workable and accurate term, because the fighting was between races, and they were indeed riots about race.¹⁸ I believe this issue with the terminology is important, and will probably be most productive if left open. I must also refer again to Omi and Winant, and invite myself and others to stay with the slipperiness and contingency of “race” as a way of working with the historical fluidity of “race riot.”

Black Washingtonians responded to the attacks as they did in part because of longstanding traditions of black resistance to various forms of oppression. This resistance had not always taken political or physical form – nor, for that matter, had the oppression. African American self definition, the various modes of survival and success forged in the midst and in the face of relentless assault – economic, social, physical, spiritual – had often masked itself protectively in what African American historians have called a culture of dissemblance: lying, acting deferent, oblivious, or foolish, playing to stereotypes. In this moment, however, a further incarnation of black political and social activism was coming into ascendance, one that was deliberately self-referential, defiant, assertive, and which called itself new, however easily its decades-deep roots could be traced. This wind was blowing very strong in Washington, D.C. that July: the newspapers, letters and speeches of black Washingtonians made that abundantly clear, as did their actions.

discussions the facts around “race riots” are inverted, so that whites who initiate the violence are disappeared and exculpated as the events are “blackened” in the telling. Thus “race riot” is understood to mean “black riot.”

¹⁸ Webster’s, by the way, says that a riot is “an assemblage of three or more persons in a public place for the purpose of accomplishing by concerted action and in a turbulent and disorderly manner a common purpose irrespective of the lawfulness of that purpose.” Of some interest, and surprisingly archaic, is its definition of “race riot: a riot animated by racial dissensions or hatreds; specifically such a conflict between whites and Negroes.” *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1993), 1959, 1870.

My main argument in this dissertation is that traditions of racial violence, and especially lynching, with its particular history and symbolic power, played a central, defining role in the Red Summer. I argue that although lynching was primarily a rural southern practice, it was deeply infused into the national consciousness. The ritualized, sexualized, public communal murders of individuals accused or convicted of, or merely rumored to have committed crimes against the racial hierarchy had a dominant place in the national psyche. Newspapers everywhere regularly carried lynching stories, some highly detailed and dramatic, others small, offhand items just a few lines long. Such stories appeared almost weekly, and sometimes more frequently, in the decades around the turn of the century.¹⁹

No matter what individuals' feelings about it may have been, this reality, the fact of these murders – altogether extralegal, almost always involving pre- and postmortem mutilation, frequently advertised in advance in local and regional newspapers and/or with flyers posted in public places, attended by anywhere from a few or a dozen to thousands of people of all ages and social backgrounds, usually photographed and otherwise memorialized – was an unavoidable and central fact of American life. My argument is that whether or not lynchings took place in one's geographic region, and no matter how one understood or felt about them, they had so much symbolic power in early twentieth century American culture that they were substantially – though of course differently – instrumental in the identity formation, and indeed in the lives of all Americans *as*

¹⁹ For recent scholarship on the idea that lynching permeated the American consciousness, see Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

Americans (including aspirant immigrants). Lynching provided an enactment and a rationalization of a fundamental antagonism between groups of Americans.

In one specific sense, lynching was a trope for white supremacy – its ideation, its function, and its consequences. Thus, the way an individual situated herself (intellectually, psychologically, emotionally) in relation to lynching was a reflection of her attitude toward the idea of white supremacy and its material effects. This is not to be mechanistic or simpleminded about lynching as a concrete act with important contextual specificities; it's rather an effort to understand the role lynching played as a practice and as a symbol in the American consciousness, itself certainly a multifarious thing/entity, rife with contradiction. Admittedly it is probably absurd to posit such an entity as “the American consciousness” *qua* entity, and I do not propose it as in any way unitary or coherent. But the basic forces at work, the specific characteristics of lynching were distinctly reflective of – and upon – the ways race was articulated in the U.S., and of the ways it functioned. Lynching furthermore expressed quite directly the racialized preoccupations around gender and sexuality which were so central to American culture. The function of lynching was to justify and sustain white male domination, as much psychically and psychologically as materially. The primary vehicles for that process were explicit, racially based formulations of manhood and womanhood, and more specifically male and female sexuality.

In this dissertation I base my analysis of the reasons for the initial white violence in D.C. as well as for the nature of the black response to that violence on this argument. I also attempt to show how contemporary observers on both sides of the color line likewise drew on lynching and the rape story so profoundly connected to it in order to understand

and explain the violence of the Red Summer in the nation's capital. In the aftermath of the violence, those who sought to understand and explain what happened in the capital, whether they were critics of or apologists for lynching and the racial belief systems which supported it, likewise connected the rioting and other racial violence of 1919 to the rape story and the practice of lynching it was designed to justify. However their assumptions and conclusions may have differed, the scenario that was most pertinent for them as an interpretive mechanism was that which underlay lynching. Strikes, revolutions, and lurking subversives notwithstanding, the most relevant explanation was the decades-old lynching story, because that story was so very central to their own and their audience's consciousness.

A final note, returning yet again to language. When James Weldon Johnson named the summer of 1919 the Red Summer, he was describing the bloody race violence of the months between April and October. He did not refer to the concurrent red scare that was flushing through the nation that year, though he may have intended, or others may have heard, an ironic allusion beneath the surface. Despite the efforts of some racist demagogues and paranoiacs, not to mention recruitment efforts by U.S. communists, and despite the obvious reality that bolshevism could have seemed a rational choice for African Americans who were – and always had been – systematically so oppressed by political and economic structures in the U.S., African Americans were not turning to Marx. Johnson may indeed have been refuting the very idea by his choice of language, though I suspect that the term “red scare” was not in use until later. In one of the many ironies, small and large, of race in the U.S., perhaps it is safest to assume that the idea of the Red Summer predated but was eclipsed in collective memory by the idea of the red

scare, just as the fundamental role of racial violence in U.S. history and culture has continually been overshadowed in the stories we have told ourselves about ourselves. Other forces and systems, however frightful, do not match racism and its brutal appendages for horror, continuity, centrality – and significance. This dissertation connects one episode from that tradition in an effort to substantiate this argument and to show how African Americans in 1919 articulated not only a critique of such violence and the inequality it supported, but an ethos and a program of resistance aimed at transforming the society by defying and defeating perpetrators of that violence.

CHAPTER ONE

Unknown Soldiers And Lost Battalions: African Americans And The Great War

I am beginning to wonder whether it will ever be possible for me to see an American (white) without wishing that he were in his Satanic Majesty's private domain. I must pray long and earnestly that hatred of my fellow man be removed from my heart and that I can truthfully lay claim to being a Christian.¹

By the time the U.S. declared war on Germany in 1917, many African Americans' lives had been transformed by the European war. Northern industries, deprived of the immigrant workforce, began not only hiring but actively recruiting black workers. The increasing exodus of blacks from the rural south beginning in the second decade of the century changed conditions in both their destination cities and the agricultural regions they left behind. At the same time, as the nation began to gird for war, questions among both whites and blacks as to the limits and possibilities of black loyalty grew more heated, and more pertinent. The isolated agricultural workers who were potential or actual migrants for the most part (at least initially) had little concern or knowledge about the war in Europe, nor awareness of the surrounding issues and arguments. Nevertheless, their lives were profoundly altered by it, whether because of the possibilities it opened up for them in terms of migration, changes in the situation at home due to the migration of others (including the increase in white violence and hostility), or, once the U.S. entered the war in 1917, because of the effects of the draft.

Once the U.S. entered the war, industrial opportunities increased, while black men were drafted along with – and in larger percentages than – whites. The debate about

¹ Letter, 2/19/1919, from an officer in France, in "Documents of the War," *Crisis*, May 1919. In *The Crisis Reader*, ed. Sondra K. Wilson (New York: Random House, 1998), 356.

service and loyalty to a country that insistently denied them democratic rights grew more heated among African Americans, especially as they began hearing about the army's treatment of black soldiers, in training camps stateside and then once they reached France. At the same time, racial violence surged upward again in 1917, after a brief downturn in the previous few years. The war highlighted key aspects of black politics in this period; it exacerbated the challenges – the relentless exploitation and oppression with which African Americans were faced – and the wide variety of responses they contemplated or undertook. All of it – political trends, challenges, and responses – was rooted in the previous half century or so of black striving and white violence.

For decades following the end of Reconstruction in 1877, black Americans in the South faced a multitude of limitations on their political, social, and economic potential. These obstacles are well-documented, and include various approaches to disfranchisement; segregated school systems (where black schools were seriously underfunded and neglected); debt-peonage practices which kept black agricultural workers perpetually in thrall to white landowners and merchants; and various forms of social marginalization designed to perpetuate and sustain white supremacy. These and other forms of oppression were both reinforced and epitomized by the constant threat of violence against any African American who might transgress the written and unwritten laws codifying their inferiority. Though white brutality could take many nonlethal forms, lynching – sometimes in the form of a white riot – was its most extreme form.

Although they were systematically oppressed in so many ways, southern African Americans were not monolithically subjugated in the turn of the century years, nor were they unitarily reconciled to inferior status of any kind. Though jim crow laws and

practices were a factor for everyone, some were able to prosper financially and socially, and to live relatively free of white interference.² In towns and cities around the South they built schools and churches, and focused on sustaining community. Many believed, with Booker T. Washington, that if they could simply make their own way in the world with integrity, the larger society would come to recognize their worthiness and eventually accept them as equal citizens. Others gave white society less credit for fairmindedness, believing instead that blacks must build autonomous lives and communities because whites would never concede willingly, but might be forced to recognize a strong and united black population once it could stand on its own – or at least strong black individuals, families, or communities. Still others were less identified with group success, and focused on individual or family efforts to make their way. Most were primarily concerned with survival, whether that meant bare subsistence or success in business or professional life. In short, African Americans, like any substantial, widely dispersed subgroup of a large population, held a range of beliefs as to their position in society and the possibilities for the future.

Whatever their economic or social position, African Americans were subject at all times to the possibility of wild violence, on an individual or group level. We know that in the peak years of lynching, between 1885 and 1895, white southerners killed at least 1600 people – and it's important to understand that this is simply the number of *recorded* lynchings, and leaves out other forms of violence, such as beatings and property destruction. There is little question that many more such killings went unrecorded. Ida B. Wells, for decades the nation's preeminent antilynching activist, estimated in the mid-

² See Glenda E. Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 27-28, passim.

1890s that 10,000 had been murdered in this way since 1865. After a second peak in 1908, lynching numbers declined until 1917, when for a few years there was an upsurge.³

This dissertation situates lynching at the heart of American consciousness in the early twentieth century. For black people, the awareness that they, their friends and families, or anyone who shared their pigmentation could find themselves in lethal danger with no recourse was a source of anger, fear, and outrage. Evidence for this consciousness is everywhere in the literature, rhetoric, and action of African Americans in the decades surrounding the turn of the century. For decades, daily newspapers around the country reported lynchings almost every week, and often more frequently. Sometimes the mention was a small item, at others a detailed and lurid front-page drama. The fact is that these stories, and the archetypes they drew on, were familiar to Americans across regional and cultural differences that divided them in nearly every other way. One significant piece of evidence of this reality is the huge and ongoing popularity of D.W. Griffiths' paeon to lynching, *The Birth of a Nation*; another is the continuous protest against it in areas where such action was possible. As the ultimate expression of racial hatred and domination in the post-slavery U.S., lynching held both highly symbolic and very concrete meaning in the context of the white riots of 1919. By the same token, as a source of black outrage and action, lynching was unsurpassed. In Washington, D.C. in the spring and summer of 1919, whites and blacks acted and reacted in the shadow of lynching – emotionally, politically, practically and symbolically.

There is a substantial literature on racial lynching in the south and a great deal of analysis as to various reasons for the epidemic, the different functions such violence

³ Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 49; 119; Mark Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance: African Americans and the United States Government During World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 29; 159.

served in different parts of the region at different moments, and the ways in which blacks and whites responded to it.⁴ Though there were innumerable variations on the racial lynching scenario, for our purposes the broad outline is most important. In 1922, after decades of extralegal mob murder, proposed federal antilynching legislation defined lynching as “three or more persons acting in concert for the purpose of depriving any person of his life without authority of law.” Neither this nor any other form of federal anti-lynching legislation was ever passed, and by mid-century lynchers were prosecuted using a Reconstruction-era criminal statute which defined a conspiracy as requiring only two people.⁵

In the years following the Civil War, and particularly after 1877, a black person in the South, especially a man, could be lynched for any perceived transgression, though it was not automatic or predictable – various factors played in to whether a specific offense would lead to violence or death. There were various types of lynchings, as W. Fitzhugh Brundage and other scholars explain, ranging from quick, quiet, efficient murders under cover of night, to mass spectacles which were advertised in local papers and attended by

⁴ For pertinent texts for this dissertation, see W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Leon Litwack, “Hellhounds” in James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms Press, 2000); Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), Chapter 8) Philip Dray, *Persons Unknown*; Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “‘The Mind that Burns in Each Body’: Women, Rape, and Racial Violence” in Ann Snitow, et al., eds. *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, 328-349. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983; Lisa Lindquist Dorr, *White Women, Rape, and the Power of Race in Virginia, 1900-1960* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁵ Dray, *Persons Unknown*, viii. Throughout the peak years of racial lynching, there were non-racial lynchings as well, and of course lynching as a practice went back centuries, but after Reconstruction in an overwhelming majority of instances it functioned primarily as a form of racial control in the U.S. South. See Brundage, “Introduction,” *Under Sentence of Death Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xxv.

hundreds or even thousands of people. Almost always, the victim or victims were tortured before death, and mutilated – genitally and otherwise.⁶

Though the general assumption was – and still is – that lynching victims were usually accused of raping or assaulting white women, in fact this was only true in a minority of instances. As the antilynching activist Ida B. Wells pointed out, rape was “a thread bare lie;” it was the PR for lynching, the excuse, not the reason.⁷ Frederick Douglass joined Wells as an early critic of the rape story, famously pointing out the political purpose and efficacy of the story, in its appeal to “a prejudice which prevails at the North as well as the South.”⁸ He and Wells both pointed out that during the Civil War white slaveowners had not hesitated to go off to war and leave their women behind on the plantations with enslaved black men. The black rapist had emerged only with freedom and the prospect of political and economic self-determination.

Martha Hodes shows that to an extent, sexual relationships between white women and black men had been tolerated if not approved throughout the South from the early colonial period until emancipation, under a variety of circumstances. Such relationships ranged from casual sexual liaisons to longlasting (if not legally) connubial arrangements. She argues that southern white anxiety about black rape was a politically inspired phenomenon, arising after emancipation and subsequently increasing in direct response to growing African American assertiveness which threatened absolute white domination –

⁶ See Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*; Litwack, “Hellhounds”; Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*.

⁷ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 56.

⁸ Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 12; Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, 66-67.

economic, social and political.⁹ Edward Ayers asserts that lynching in the New South functioned as “a way for white people to reconcile weak governments [in certain regions] with a demand for an impossibly high level of racial mastery,” a means of policing black behavior through terror.¹⁰ Some African Americans, including Frederick Douglass as early as 1892, even saw the rise of lynching as in some ironic way a positive sign, an indication that whites recognized black progress and were reacting out of fear.¹¹ By the second decade of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois was using lynching to critique not only white American society but U.S. political identity in the world.¹²

More people were lynched for murder than any other accusation, and a substantial number died for more minor seeming offenses. In fact, after 1877 a man could endanger his own life by being successful at his business – as a farmer or a merchant, say – or by standing up for himself in a dispute with a white person. Lisa Lindquist Dorr argues that in Virginia (where fewer people were lynched than in other southern states), the most dangerous transgression was actually physical violence against a white man, rather than a white woman, because such an attack symbolized rebellion against the social order, which was the true offense.¹³ Numerous factors were always at play, and it was less

⁹ Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, Chapter 1, 157-58, 177, passim. Hodes explains that class and other factors complicated the circumstances and had much to do with whether or not such relationships would provoke violence. The important point is that whatever whites or blacks thought about them, or how they were treated, these couples could survive public awareness of their connection in the decades before emancipation. For political ramifications (and some other instances of toleration of these relationships), see also, Dray, 68; Gilmore, 82-83; Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 66; Paul Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 100-108; and others, especially Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Mind that Burns in Each Body”.

¹⁰ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 157.

¹¹ Litwack, “Hellhounds,” 29.

¹² David L. Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 514, passim.

¹³ As she explains it, black men were expected to lust for white women – such desire was in fact a pillar of the white supremacist argument for segregation. The danger lay not in the lust itself but in acting on it,

random than it might seem from a superficial examination, but the reality was that all black people in the South, and especially black men, lived with the possibility that they or someone they knew or loved could be humiliated, beaten, or killed as punishment for violation of a code which they were expected from an early age to understand and obey. White people too lived with this knowledge, and were equally – though differently – shaped by it.

There were also periodic explosions of mass violence against blacks in cities such as Wilmington, North Carolina in 1898, Atlanta in 1906, and Springfield, Illinois in 1908. In each of the preceding cases, white mobs attacked the black population, usually incited by weeks of inflammatory newspaper stories.¹⁴ These episodes were in one sense exacerbated lynchings: the same dynamics applied. In fact, some scholars refer to such attacks as “mass lynchings” or pogroms.¹⁵ In both cases, a black person or population somehow overstepped the boundaries laid by whites, perhaps by being too successful, or not deferential enough (which in the eyes of white southerners was essentially the same thing). Such transgressions, real or imputed, did not always lead to violence, but they could, if the conditions were right. Lynching was a metaphoric and symbolic as well as actual practice, and its function – to curtail black aspiration and achievement – could be accomplished by mass violence against large groups as well as by attacks on specific individuals or small groups.

which was seen not as an offense against the woman but rather her man, and this affront was the basis for violence, because it represented the real threat.

¹⁴ On Wilmington, see Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, chapter 4; on Atlanta, Lewis, *Du Bois*, 333-37, passim; Dray, *Persons Unknown*, 162-67, passim; on Springfield, Dray, 167-70.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Arthur I. Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-In, 1919 and the 1960s* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1975), 9. Waskow here cites Gunnar Myrdal. Other scholars of racial violence draw the same comparison; Myrdal drew analogies to Eastern European pogroms in distinguishing such events from riots because they were not “two-way battles.” (See also the introduction to this dissertation.)

These white riots¹⁶ – or pogroms – and the intensification of jim crow laws and practices led to the birth of the NAACP in 1909 and an increase in black energy for uplift and institution-building. Ida B. Wells’ antilynching efforts and the activism engendered by specific events were supported and publicized in black newspapers around the country, which expressed a range of opinions as to the appropriate plan of action, from the more conservative “Bookerite” view,¹⁷ through the unapologetic demands of Du Bois and his ilk and, by the teens, including both Marcus Garvey’s style of black nationalism and the radical socialist exhortations of A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen’s *Messenger*.

The election of the southern progressive Woodrow Wilson in 1912 was a moment of hope for African Americans which quickly devolved into deep disappointment. In his 1924 book *The Shame of America*, black activist and NAACP leader Archibald Grimke bitterly looked back at Wilson’s election: “Then in the fulness [sic] of time came Woodrow Wilson, the ripe, consummate fruit of all this national contradiction between profession and practice, promise and performance.”¹⁸ As a candidate in a close race, Wilson courted the black vote, meeting with black leaders who reported favorably on their discussions, and writing to the bishop of the black AME Zion church that he earnestly wished “to see justice done [black citizens] in every matter, and not mere grudging justice, but justice executed with liberality and cordial good feeling.”¹⁹

Du Bois himself, though suspecting that the Virginian Wilson had no love for African

¹⁶ Again, see my introduction for a discussion of terminology.

¹⁷ Refers to Booker T. Washington, principal of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and favorite of white leaders across the political spectrum for years. Washington had many adherents among African Americans, though as the twentieth century advanced his views lost currency.

¹⁸ Quoted in Arthur Barbeau and Florette Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers Black American Troops in World War I*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), 188.

¹⁹ Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*, 423-24; William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 229.

Americans, endorsed him in the *Crisis*, asserting that the candidate “gives us hope.”

Motivated by the encouragement of prominent voices and their dissatisfaction with the alternatives, unprecedented numbers of black voters deserted the Republican party to vote for Wilson.²⁰

Almost as soon as he took office, however, Wilson abandoned those voters. The new president’s cabinet first discussed the “problem” of integrated federal workspaces at an early meeting; within months some offices began to show a new policy, as screens went up between newly devised black and white sections, and lavatories and lunchrooms were segregated. Wilson went further, appointing or nominating whites to posts that had traditionally been held by black men and restricting black appointees to the most menial positions. A 1914 requirement that applications for civil service jobs be accompanied by a photograph of the applicant was seen by African Americans as one of the new screening devices designed to foil black seekers of jobs or advancement.²¹

Wilson’s general refusal to speak publicly on racial issues was in fact the most benevolent expression of his administration’s racial views and policies. His belief was that segregation was “distinctly to the advantage of the colored people themselves.”²² Fearful of alienating the “solid south,” the president withstood calls by black activists for a statement against lynching,²³ much less support for efforts toward gaining civil rights, and in his reluctant interactions with black leaders he freely exhibited indifference to

²⁰ Kathleen Wolgemuth, “Woodrow Wilson and Federal Segregation,” 158. Because “statistics on Negro votes in the 1912 election are non-existent,” Wolgemuth bases her assertion on accounts in black publications and the testimony of “leading Negro figures.” (n. 1, 158).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 158-62, citing Josephus Daniels’ Desk Diary for cabinet meeting. For more on segregation of federal workspaces, see Ellis; Barbeau and Henri. For more on civil service jobs, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

²² Wilson to Howard Allen Bridgman, Sept. 8, 1913, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, v. 28, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 265-66.

²³ He only spoke out publicly against it once.

their concerns and to whatever political influence they might wield. In response to Wilsonian federal segregation, Booker T. Washington himself remarked that he had “never seen the colored people so discouraged and bitter as they are at the present time.”²⁴ However discouraged they may have been, African Americans around the country sent letters and petitions protesting the new segregationist policies and practices; the national ramifications of such actions were not lost on them. Wilson also heard from dissenting whites, including academics and political officials, among whom were the governors of Michigan and Massachusetts. Wolgemuth notes that mass meetings and articles in the black and progressive white press were also vital anti-segregationist tools for publicizing and protesting federal action. She asserts further that on the whole these efforts were successful in impeding if not eradicating the process of segregation in government workspaces; she also sees them as having unified African Americans, inspiring and motivating new ideas and new leadership among them.²⁵

Migration

With the onset of hostilities in Europe in 1914, certain kinds of change began to accelerate for African Americans. Fighting in Europe drastically slowed the influx of European immigrants to the U.S. Their numbers fell from 1.2 million in 1914 to 376,000 in 1915, and continued to drop, reaching 110,000 in 1918.²⁶ Northern industrialists began to look south for a new source of cheap labor. A series of crop failures in the South, brought on by flooding, drought, and boll weevil infestation made the hardscrabble agricultural existence of most African Americans even more difficult than before. Combined with mounting discontent at the extent of economic exploitation, political

²⁴ Quoted in Tuttle, *Race Riot*, 230.

²⁵ Wolgemuth, “Woodrow Wilson and Federal Segregation,” 165-68; 171.

²⁶ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 18; Palmer, *Passageways*, v. 2, 159.

disfranchisement, and violence black southerners had to contend with, these factors made a previously unappealing option seem more and more sensible, and black people began to move north. At the same time, there was an increase in Afro-Caribbean immigration, mostly to New York City, where the rapidly growing black population was beginning to consolidate its center in Harlem. The Caribbean presence added a complicating element of immigrant energy and cultural difference to the mix of longtime residents and migrants from the south which energized the roiling waters of black New York even as the city was rapidly gaining on Washington as a political and artistic center for blacks around the country. Into this mix strode Marcus Garvey, and his program of race pride and black political, cultural, and economic separatism took strong hold among a large sector of the city's rapidly expanding black working class. The New Negro, with all his faces, was ascendant.

Harry Haywood offers a useful and succinct characterization of the New Negro movement as “an ideological current which reflected the new mood of militancy and social awareness of young Blacks of the post-war period.”²⁷ Though this current carried individuals and groups with often widely different political and social agendas, all shared that sense of newness, and brought an energy which was militant in the strict sense – i.e. combative. Further, they all critiqued and undertook to fight the inequities of the white supremacist order, though in a variety of ways. The migration was simultaneously an engine and a consequence of New Negro philosophy.

From 1914 to 1917, between five and ten thousand black people left the rural south each month. In the wave of 1916-17, a total of some four to five hundred thousand

²⁷ Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978), 123.

moved out, generally to cities in the north, though some went to southern Atlantic cities.²⁸ As the country began preparing for war, northern industrialists actively sought black workers to replace not only the stalled European immigrant influx but also white men lost to military service. With wartime industrial production shifting into gear, the need for labor and the openness as to who might constitute the workforce increasingly overcame previous racial restrictions, often to the angry dismay of white unions.

Southern whites reacted against black out-migration variously with alarm, scorn, anger, hurt, and violence. Some celebrated it, proclaiming an end to the “Negro Problem.” Black residents’ decisions to leave were attributed to disloyalty, to foolishness, or to the efforts of troublemakers, primarily northern labor agents. Black publications like the *Crisis* and the *Chicago Defender*, which published not only ads for jobs in northern cities, but editorials urging the move and offering political as well as economic arguments in favor of it, were banned in parts of the South, and anyone found in possession of such publications might face serious consequences.²⁹

Black leaders were divided on migration. The more conservative Bookerites, “deplored [it] as unjustified and extremely unwise,” and the historian Carter Woodson warned that it was simply a means by which “the maltreatment of Negroes [would] be nationalized,” but nothing slowed the exodus until after the war ended.³⁰ According to the historian James Grossman, the migration of mostly young, single black southerners was a deliberate rejection of southern ways. In his analysis, by leaving they

refused to accept their place along the color line and
decided to seek full citizenship in the industrial

²⁸ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 19, passim.

²⁹ James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 38; 44; 86.

³⁰ Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*, 526-27.

North...[looking] to an entirely different model of both individual and racial integration into American society and economy [than that proposed by Washington]. Explicitly and implicitly the [migrants] were repudiating relationships and ideas upon which southern black elites had staked their reputations.³¹

In Grossman's view the northward movement was threatening to these black leaders both practically, in that it physically removed their constituents, but also because the decision to move expressed a direct challenge to their "ideological framework." Migration was both a symptom of and one of the forces driving a shift in the thinking of many blacks about their position in society and how to better it. Central to this shift, as Grossman points out, was the abandonment of the idea of "landed independence" in the agricultural south as the focus of aspiration. For migrants, prosperity based on industrial work became the vehicle for attaining "freedom and citizenship." One woman wanted to move north because of "the great chance that a colored parson has in Chicago of making a living with all the privilege that the whites have...." Economic opportunity – or the hope of it – was a primary "pull factor." As for the "push:"

Just a few months ago they hung Widow Baggage's husband from Hirshbery bridge because he talked back to a white man. He was a prosperous Farmer owning about 80 acres. They killed another man because he dared to sell his cotton 'off the place.' These things have got us sore.³²

Besides violence, there was drought, infestation, and the unending cycle of debt peonage. The writer continued, "Before the North opened up with work all we could do was to move from one plantation to another in hope of finding something better." But migration was not limited to those who were most vulnerable economically and socially.

Professionals moved north as opportunities there increased and as their clientele in the

³¹ Grossman, *Land of Hope*, 57.

³² *Ibid.*, 36; 18.

south began to diminish. A number of ministers moved entire congregations north, sometimes all at once, sometimes in stages.

Some white southern papers were critical of the situation in the South. They recognized and pointed to exploitive practices and political disfranchisement, or to lynching and other forms of violence as the reasons for black migration, and called on whites to respond to the danger of losing this indispensable labor force. Citing an investigation demonstrating the correlation between lynching and migration, the *Columbia [S.C.] State* said, “Every Southern lynching is an emigration agent working effectively for Northern employers.”³³ Calls for reform alternated with charges of black disloyalty and foolishness, and with warnings to white northerners about the “true nature” of the incoming population.

Despite the reform impulse among those whites who were concerned about the diminishing labor pool, during this time there was very little actual change in the conditions of life for African Americans in the South. In fact, in many places one result of migration was a new basis for white violence and threats. Black migrants were frequently forced to leave secretly, and some delayed or prevented altogether by white efforts at containing the outflow. In Georgia, police were armed to keep black people from leaving.³⁴ In speeches around the South, Robert Russa Moton, Booker T. Washington’s successor as principal at Tuskegee, echoed Washington’s Atlanta Compromise speech of twenty years before, urging black people to stay where they were. Other southern leaders and organizations such as the Negro Councils of Defense, often at the urging or instruction of whites, reminded black farmers that their patriotic duty lay in

³³ Ellis, *Race, War and Surveillance*, 19.

³⁴ Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*, 516.

keeping southern farms productive. The New Orleans Chamber of Commerce funded a newspaper that described the South as a “land of opportunity” for black people.³⁵

Migrants faced not only an often difficult trip north, but on arrival an entirely alien and complicated situation. Though many had friends and family in their destination cities, as well as a growing number of cohorts and some institutional support, particularly from organizations like the Urban League, there was nothing in their prior experience to prepare them for the new environment and its ways. Relocation was challenging on every level, from the most fundamental needs for food and shelter, to more internal questions of identity and culture. Acclimation (literal as well as figurative) was all-consuming.

Scholars agree that intense violence – and the everpresent threat of such violence – were a central factor in the black migration out of the south. Lynching was simply the most extreme manifestation of a continuum of violent practices, which included various forms of economic exploitation, social marginalization, and political disfranchisement. This system had multiple variations across the south, and developed differently in different towns, counties, states and regions, but it was consistent in certain particulars, no matter what the specifics. In certain places, African Americans were generally left alone to do their business and lead their lives, but even in those places where a stable and peaceful coexistence might develop, there was always – whether people were actively aware of it or not – the possibility of an instantaneous and disastrous overthrow of the status quo, either for an individual or small group, or on a larger scale, as in Wilmington in 1898, or in Atlanta in 1906.

The Chicago *Defender*, *Crisis*, the *Messenger*, and other black publications insistently broadcast the rapaciousness and shamelessness of white mobs. Atrocity stories

³⁵ Grossman, *Land of Hope* 56.

and photos such as one in the *Defender* of a black family in Texas in 1915, hung for bringing in the first cotton harvest in their district, were frequently the deciding push for migrants.³⁶ Though it was a Chicago paper, the *Defender* was circulated nationwide, and stories like this one stimulated both the movement out of the South and political discontent everywhere. The paper received countless letters seeking help or guidance in finding work, listing the writers' skills and accomplishments, their willingness to work and determination to better their situations. One young man wrote,

After twenty years of seeing my people lynched for any offense from spitting on the sidewalk to stealing a mule, I made up my mind that I would turn the prow of my ship toward the part of the country where the people at least made a pretense at being civilized.³⁷

President Wilson's refusal to make even a comment against lynching and congressional inability to bring antilynching legislation to a vote were widely deplored in black newspapers and letters, and a central focus of NAACP organizing. In a bloody feedback loop, the very problems with the cotton crops in the South which impelled black out-migration also fed regional economic anxiety, all of which exacerbated the white violence that was already pushing many blacks to leave. At the same time, the emerging politics of the New Negro explicitly connected the critique of "white civilization" already so well articulated by the antilynching movement to militant calls for black action, in this case specifically the act of leaving.³⁸

Intensification: 1915

In May 1915, a German submarine sank the British steamship *Lusitania*, killing among others some one hundred Americans, which increased pressure for U.S. entry into

³⁶ Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, 224.

³⁷ Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 490.

³⁸ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, Ch. 2; Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching*, Ch. 1.

the fighting in Europe. Wilson remained reluctant, along with many other Americans.³⁹ Nonetheless, new National Guard regiments began to form, and there was a movement among both black men and white to enlist in the armed forces in anticipation of war.

Also in May of 1915 came the gruesome lynching in Waco, Texas, of Jesse Washington, which prompted an NAACP investigation and the publication in the *Crisis* of “one of the nation’s most comprehensive and disturbing accounts of a lynching.”⁴⁰ The Waco report did not come out until June of 1916, but Du Bois had already produced “The Lynching Industry” in February 1915. This article contained a year-by-year tabulation of all known lynchings between 1885 and 1914, and a supplement detailing all the murders of 1914. “All this goes to show how peculiarly fitted the United States is for moral leadership of the world,” said Du Bois.⁴¹ With the Waco lynching, national attention and outrage were intensified by a series of photographs taken to be sold as souvenirs, which captured the details all too well – including the “juxtaposition of young straw-hatted onlookers and Washington’s blistered remains,” from which the smoke still rose. These photos were reproduced in newspapers around the country, until the photographer, who had intended them as promotional material for the city, halted sale at the request of Waco’s business leaders.⁴²

That same year, with black migration and American nativism both on the rise, the Ku Klux Klan was reborn, but this time that organization did not restrict itself to the rural South. Central to the impetus for this revival was the release of D.W. Griffiths’ cinema masterpiece *The Birth of a Nation*, which offered among other things a powerful origin

³⁹ Richard Slotkin, *Lost Battalions: The Great War and the Crisis of American Nationalism* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005), 26.

⁴⁰ Dray, *Persons Unknown*, 215.

⁴¹ Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*, 514.

⁴² Dray, *Persons Unknown*, 215-19.

myth for the organization, to which the righteous lynching of black men was intrinsic.⁴³ The film drew thousands of spectators and thousands of protesters. Ironically, it actually benefited the NAACP, which organized major interracial demonstrations against it in cities with large black populations and gained new members, publicity, and financial support in response to its organizing.⁴⁴ The movie also carried a strong anti-war message, which worked on multiple levels:

Griffiths' vivid depiction of the trench warfare of 1864 reminded audiences of newsreel and photographic images of the Western Front. Screen images and editorial title cards underlined the moral horror and futility of war, echoing Wilson's calls for neutrality. The implied analogy suggested that the European conflict be seen as a civil war of the white or (in Griffiths' words) 'Aryan races,' which could only benefit the barbaric 'Colored races' held in subjection by white powers.⁴⁵

The screening of the movie at the White House in February, and the President's enthusiastic approval of it – he was reported to have said the film was “like writing history with lightning” and that it was “all so terribly true” – served to build feeling against him and his administration among blacks and whites who deplored the movie. The fight to keep it out of theaters brought together groups and individuals who were usually on different tracks, if not actively opposed to one another.⁴⁶

At the end of 1915 Booker T. Washington died, a passage which solidified for many the ascendance of the NAACP and the declining relevance of a leadership that

⁴³ According to some scholars, another event driving the rebirth of the Klan was the August lynching in Atlanta of a Jewish man, Leo Frank, after two years of legal proceedings, for the murder of a young girl. Members of the mob who killed Frank paraded in costume at the Atlanta premiere of the movie, and later burned a cross on Stone Mountain, imitating not the Reconstruction-era Klan, but the Hollywood Klan of Griffiths' movie. See Dray, 207-214; Mark Schneider, “*We Return Fighting*,” 233.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 41; Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*, 507-08.

⁴⁵ Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 36-37.

⁴⁶ Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*, 506; 508. Of course, since much of the film's historical basis came from Wilson's book, it was not surprising that he would think it was both compelling and true.

continued to preach patience and unobtrusive progress to an increasingly importunate black population. With nearly a hundred black people lynched in that year alone, disgust at the continuing rise of jim crow and the failure of the federal government to even feign concern, and with the prospect of a new style of life in the cities, Bookerite ways had lost relevance, perhaps especially among the young. Around the south, black colleges clandestinely offered non-vocational courses, in direct contravention of the dictates of Washington and his followers, his supporters in government, and most importantly perhaps, the white trustees and foundations on whom most of the colleges relied for funding. These foundations, of whom Washington had long been a favorite, dispensed scarce resources to black colleges on the condition that they were giving their students an industrial education, outfitting them with the kinds of skills that would prepare them for racially “appropriate” work in the trades, domestic service, agricultural work and animal husbandry. The fact that black students were aspiring to professional careers, and the idea that their schools might attempt to equip them for such careers, was seen by government agencies and many philanthropists as foolish and pretentious, as well as dangerously irresponsible. What this trend indicates is that black students and many of their teachers were no longer willing to go along with the idea – to the extent that they ever had been – that their ambitions must remain within the bounds defined by whites and the black leaders they approved.⁴⁷

The Coming of War

A variety of arguments among black people about military service were in full swing before the U.S. entered the European war. The idea of service abroad held certain attractions for African Americans, though at its base it might seem illogical given the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 546-51.

degree to which they were oppressed at home. It was, some argued, an opportunity to prove and gain access to citizenship rights, never mind that all previous displays of loyalty and effort in wartime had failed to bring blacks full enjoyment of their rights and privileges as Americans. Young men like nineteen-year-old Harry Haywood, joined up out of a youthful romanticism that had more to do with race pride than patriotism. When he signed up with the black Eighth Regiment of the Illinois National Guard, he had an assortment of reasons.

The regiment, officered by Blacks from the colonel on down (many of them veterans of the four Black Regular Army regiments), gave me a feeling of pride. They had a high esprit de corps which emphasized racial solidarity. I didn't regard it just as a part of a U.S. Army unit, but as some sort of a big social club of fellow race-men. Still, I knew that we would eventually get into the war. That did not bother me; on the contrary, romance, adventure, travel beckoned. I saw possible escape from the inequities and oppression which was the lot of Blacks in the U.S. I was already a Francophile. I had read and heard about the fairness of the French with respect to the race issue. It seems now, as I look back upon it, that patriotism was the least of my motives.⁴⁸

At the same time, other African Americans were unconcerned about the war one way or the other, far removed as they were in their own circumstances from the issues and arguments surrounding it either because of extreme rural isolation, or their immersion in the industrial intensity of northern cities.

The 1916 "Preparedness Campaign" fed the growing debate among African Americans about what loyalty if any they owed the U.S. government, and whether or how much they ought to contribute to the anticipated war effort. The compromise that led to the formation of the black Fifteenth New York National Guard Regiment (later to be

⁴⁸ Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 42.

known as the Harlem Hellfighters) is one example of some of the complications underlying black service. After years of thwarted attempts, the unit was formed in June 1916. State officials conceded to its formation on the condition that the regiment would be commanded by a white man. Leaders in Harlem only agreed once they received a guarantee that black officers already in place in the provisional company would keep their commissions.⁴⁹ This arrangement anticipated those that would be made later, once the nation entered the war and black combat divisions were formed. Whites were adamant that no white man would ever be in a position to take orders from a black officer; having a white commander and senior officers of black units would ensure this, while still allowing some room for black men to be officers.

These and other issues complicated discussions on both sides of the color line about what contemporary U.S. armed forces should look like, and how they ought to function. In anticipation of entry to the war, and of a national draft, there was widespread debate about drafting and/or allowing black men to serve. Some white politicians and citizens deplored the idea of including black men in the services, fearing the consequences of arming and teaching them to fight. At the same time others argued against drafting only white men and leaving the South “unprotected” against the “dangerous” black men who would be left behind.⁵⁰ There were, of course, a number of black regiments already in the army, most of them serving along the border with Mexico (itself in the midst of a revolution), and some in the Philippines.

In the summer of 1916 the NAACP’s annual meeting was held in Amenia, New York at the home of Joel Spingarn, then chairman of the board. The organization set up

⁴⁹ Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 43.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 38; Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*; Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*.

the meeting as an assembly of leaders from “across the civil rights spectrum” in hopes of devising a unified approach to the challenges facing them all, and a transformation of the factionalism that had previously characterized black leadership. Though the participants emerged with a statement of principles and the intention of continuing to work together, David Levering Lewis asserts that the meeting was most remarkable for having happened at all, and that “it marked a definite shift in the balance of power within black America, a reflection of the increasingly industrial, northern and national character of the American Dilemma [i.e. race].”⁵¹ Also significant is the fact that the meeting received visits and messages from a range of prominent whites, including the president, then in the midst of a re-election campaign, and his Republican rival, Charles Evan Hughes. Despite southern disfranchisement and other types of marginalization, by 1916 black leaders other than the Bookerites had some access to the highest levels of power.

On April 2, 1917 President Wilson, re-elected only five months before with the slogan “He Kept Us Out of War,” asked Congress to declare war on Germany. On April 6, Congress complied. In May, it passed the draft law, which required all male citizens aged 21 to 31 to register.

In the context of a rising nationalistic tide, certain white leaders and government officials began to raise questions about black loyalty. “The Wilson administration took...allegations [of Germans spreading anti-war propaganda among blacks] seriously, and for the next four years, six federal government departments and several local agencies maintained a constant watch on the activities of black civilians and soldiers and equal rights organizations and publications.”⁵² African Americans generally scorned the

⁵¹ Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*, 517-521.

⁵² Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, xvi. See also, Kornweibel, *Seeing Red*.

idea of black susceptibility to German manipulation, but they did wonder, openly, how much loyalty they owed a country which so steadfastly refused them their citizenship rights. The government's inclination to ascribe their civil rights and antilynching demands to German or pacifist propaganda – rather than to the conditions African Americans were subject to and their rightful claims to citizenship – was simultaneously laughable, appalling, and indicative of the challenges they faced.

Beyond suspicions of black disloyalty, many whites were afraid and/or scornful of the idea of arming and training black men for combat, based on long-held ideas about black inferiority. Senator Vardaman of Mississippi was not alone in his opinion that there was “no greater menace to the South” than the arming of “millions of negroes,” and a substantial number of northern whites felt the same. Even the liberal *New Republic* was susceptible, sharing in southern unease at the prospect of arming “large numbers of lusty young blacks accustomed to no other discipline than that of the plantation.”⁵³ At the same time, negrophobes did not want African Americans to escape any obligations they might have, nor any possibility of servitude to the nation, especially not at the expense of more whites being called.⁵⁴ Whatever their motivations, whites were certainly clear in their objections to arming black men. As it happened, military authorities, though sympathetic to if not in full agreement with whites who deplored the idea of black men as soldiers, were determined to gain access to the manpower they would provide – indeed, they seem to have thought it was indispensable. Officials assured southern congressmen that black draftees would be used for labor rather than combat, and in general they lived up to their

⁵³ Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 34-35; Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 11, 74-75.

⁵⁴ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 76.

promise (notwithstanding their contradictory assurances to black leaders).⁵⁵ As the military saw it, black conscripts would free whites for fighting.

In the end, 20 percent of black soldiers overseas (including National Guard units already serving when the U.S. entered the war) saw combat, while the rest were relegated to the Services of Supply and other laboring capacities.⁵⁶ In contrast, two-thirds of white soldiers went into combat. Because African Americans in and out of the service looked on the opportunity to fight as a chance to demonstrate black manhood and worthiness of equal treatment, the designation of black men primarily for labor was particularly frustrating. The white supremacist beliefs underlying the color line were simultaneously expressed and reinforced by the AEF's restrictions on black combat in training and deployment.⁵⁷

Through the spring and summer, as the "black scare" built, African Americans around the country held loyalty meetings and wrote letters to black papers expressing allegiance to the nation and the war effort. Throughout the war they bought liberty bonds in disproportionate amounts relative to their wealth (though black merchants and businessmen in the South apparently experienced a great deal of pressure from white authorities to do so, which skews the picture somewhat).⁵⁸ The debate among blacks remained hot and the range of opinions as to the proper response was wide. Those who held that blacks owed the U.S. government little or nothing did not feel that way due to

⁵⁵ Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 43.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 43-44; Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 74. For excellent discussion and details on the intricate maneuvering of military officials, black leaders, and white politicians around the specifics of whether and how to use black servicemen, see Barbeau and Henri, Chapter Three and throughout, as well as Ellis, throughout but especially Chapters 1-3.

⁵⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois, "An Essay Toward a History of the Black Man in the Great War," in David Levering Lewis, ed., *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 700-701, 706-711, passim. For one regiment's experience of systematic as well as incidental mistreatment of black combat troops, see Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, Chapter 2, "A Black Regiment in World War I."

⁵⁸ Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 13-14.

German propaganda. Ellis says that “many African Americans – perhaps most – were ignorant, or indifferent, or skeptical, or antagonistic” toward the reasons given for entering the war, “and they were either unimpressed or repelled by the home-front propaganda that accompanied mobilization.”⁵⁹ Barbeau and Henri, on the other hand, claim that “there is solid evidence that the submerged black tenth of America’s population was stirred by the ringing words of President Wilson” calling the nation to arms.⁶⁰ What is clear is that blacks, like other Americans, had a range of responses – including ambivalence – about the war and specifically the role they were being asked to play.

In one frequently-quoted story, a black man explained his decision not to enlist: “The Germans ain’t done nothing to me and if they have, I forgive ‘em.” The implicit contrast here was with American whites, who had indeed done something to him, and who continued to threaten him. Other black men were even more direct. One draftee wrote to the secretary of war that he would “go forth to battle, not as a patriotic soldier eager to defend a flag that defends me and mine, but as a prisoner of war, shackled to a gun that shall spit fire in defense of a humanity that does not include me.”⁶¹ With the prisoner of war image, the writer managed to invoke simultaneously the shackled past of slavery and a contemporary formulation of black manhood which was both defiant and oppressed. He portrayed himself as patriarchal (“me *and mine*”),⁶² virile, and powerful: his gun would “spit fire.” He was also by implication entitled to be defended by that flag

⁵⁹ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 16.

⁶⁰ Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 11.

⁶¹ Both quoted in Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 47.

⁶² emphasis added.

which wronged him. He would defend it because he was forced to and because he was a man, even though his misguided country, symbolized by the flag, rejected him.

A significant number of blacks pointed to the absurdity of the idea that they should fight across the water “to make the world safe for democracy,” as Wilson put it, when that ideal was so far from their own lived reality. For nearly all of the African Americans who discussed black military service, whether pro or con, this contradiction figured centrally. At the same time, however, to accept the exclusion of black men from the draft would clearly be conceding inequality. Those who argued in favor of full support for the war effort addressed this paradox and used the demand for equality as a rationale. Since the outbreak of conflict in Europe, Du Bois had written a number of analytic essays on its causes and on the forces at work. When the declaration of war came, he welcomed it, seeing the war as an opportunity for the world to come into balance.⁶³

James Weldon Johnson assessed the situation days after Wilson asked Congress for its declaration: “[T]he right to fight for one’s country...is one of the fundamental rights of citizenship.” Furthermore, black soldiers would be fighting “with [their] eyes wide open..., repeating [the] demand that this nation do its duty.” And finally, an eminently practical consideration: “even if there can be no sense of patriotism, ...the bald truth is that the Negro cannot afford to be rated as a disloyal element in this nation.”⁶⁴

Lynching and Riot in Wartime

⁶³ Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*, 491, 503-5, 525-26.

⁶⁴ James Weldon Johnson, *New York Age*, April 5, 1917; *Boston Advertiser*, April 9, 1917; *New York Tribune*, April 11, 1917. Quoted in Mark Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 15.

Highlighting the contradictions facing blacks being asked to serve and sacrifice for the sake of their country, brutal racial violence was on the rise again in 1917. In May a man named Ell Persons was burned alive outside Memphis, in one of the year's major spectacle lynchings. Persons was a farmer, accused of raping and murdering a sixteen year old white girl whose body was found not far from his land. He had been interrogated and released twice before he supposedly confessed to police after a beating.

Some southern papers praised the orderliness of the "proceedings" in the Persons lynching, and the perfect authority of the "committee which had planned and executed the capture of the black slayer from the state authorities...."⁶⁵ These proceedings involved dousing a man with gasoline, slicing off his ears before burning, and the usual post-mortem dismemberment, after which some of his remains were driven downtown and flung onto the sidewalk in front of a group of black pedestrians. His head was retained by the committee, later to be displayed in a barbershop.⁶⁶ Articles describing the lynching in detail appeared in white newspapers around the country, and the photo of his severed head was sold as a postcard souvenir in stores around Memphis for twenty-five cents.⁶⁷ Black papers featured this photo for months.⁶⁸ The lynching of Ell Persons was more remarkable for its typicality than for its savagery; the specifics of the violence were not unusual.⁶⁹ And this lynching was also "notable," according to Philip Dray,

for the inventiveness of the Memphis newspapers in trying to strike new middle ground on the lynching issue by

⁶⁵ Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, 5/23/1917. Reprinted in Dray, *Persons Unknown*, 233. At least one southern paper, the Meriden, Miss., *Dispatch*, carried an editorial deploring the lynching, and particularly the fact that women and girls watched it. ("Another Horror," reprinted in the Chicago *Tribune*, "Editorial of the Day," 6/13/1917).

⁶⁶ Dray, *ibid.*, 232-34; Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 60.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Washington *Post*, 5/23/1917; Chicago *Tribune*, 5/23/1917; Los Angeles *Times*, 5/23/1917; Boston *Daily Globe*, 5/23/1917.

⁶⁸ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 60.

⁶⁹ See Allen, et al, *Without Sanctuary*.

redefining the practice as one that could be socially useful and acceptable – if only it was carried out in a clean, dignified manner.

The idea that lynch mobs were performing a useful function and keeping society safe was particularly powerful in relation to white unease in this period at the growing numbers of African Americans in cities. In this light, the event gains even more significance in relation to another instance that summer of intense racial violence.

In East St. Louis, Illinois, that July brought one of the most important episodes of white mob violence in the twentieth century.⁷⁰ Recently arrived African American workers were blamed by whites (many of whom were also new to the city) for the 1916 Republican victory in the state, and more importantly for shifting the balance of power between unions and management. Inflammatory newspaper stories about a “crime wave,” which some sources say was fabricated, played their usual part. A number of African Americans had armed themselves due to the mounting violence, and on the first of July two white men were shot and killed in a black neighborhood. As it happened, the men were police detectives, apparently investigating an earlier incident when at least one car full of whites had driven through a black neighborhood shooting into homes and had received return fire. The day after the policemen were killed, whites held a meeting at the Labor Temple from which they set out en masse and began to attack the city’s blacks, burning homes and beating and killing men, women, and children in the streets, most of them reportedly unarmed and unresisting. After three days of murder, mutilation, and torching in the face of police and National Guard inaction (and possible participation), from 39 to 125 (and some reports said more) blacks were dead. Eight whites had been

⁷⁰ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 31. For detailed descriptions and analysis of the riot and its aftermath, see Ellis, 31-46; Lewis, 536-39; Dray, 234-36

killed, some of them accidentally by other whites. Newspapers around the country printed gruesome accounts and photos of what some called the “first American pogrom.”⁷¹

Four weeks later, on July 28 some 10,000 African Americans marched silently down Fifth Avenue in New York to the beat of muffled drums. The sidewalks were lined with supporters – 20,000 of them, by some reports.⁷² The women and children were dressed in white, the men in mourning black, and many carried signs with messages like “YOUR HANDS ARE FILLED WITH BLOOD” and “MR. PRESIDENT, WHY NOT MAKE AMERICA SAFE FOR DEMOCRACY?” The Baltimore *Afro-American* commented on the difficulty blacks had investing in the war effort: “Through their tears they cannot see the difference between German Frightfulness and American Frightfulness so long as the blood of women and children is shed needlessly.”⁷³ A leaflet distributed at the march connected the brutality at East St. Louis to larger problems:

We march because the growing consciousness and solidarity of race, coupled with sorrow and discrimination, have made us one, a union that may never be dissolved....We march because we are thoroughly opposed to Jim Crow cars, Segregation, Discrimination, Lynching, and the host of evils that are forced upon us....We march because we want our children to live in a better land and enjoy fairer conditions than have been our lot.⁷⁴

African Americans explicitly connected the varieties of violence and forms of discrimination they faced with the “growing consciousness and solidarity of race.” Continuing efforts to curtail their aspirations and achievements fed the primacy of race-based “union” and the political critique of “social” problems. Du Bois’ editorial on the

⁷¹ Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*, 537.

⁷² Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 26.

⁷³ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 40.

⁷⁴ Palmer, *Passageways*, v. 2, 106.

riot was “repeated in thousands of churches and homes, becoming both slogan and catechism for African-Americans: ‘No land that loves to lynch “niggers” can lead the hosts of Almighty God.’”⁷⁵ Hubert Harrison, a nationalist leader in Harlem and editor of the *Voice* warned,

UNBEKNOWN TO THE WHITE PEOPLE OF THIS
LAND A TEMPER IS BEING DEVELOPED AMONG
NEGROES WHICH THE AMERICAN PEOPLE WILL
HAVE TO RECKON WITH.⁷⁶

Many scholars see the East St. Louis riot as a major turning point in African American political attitudes and behavior. In public meetings around the country black people spoke of arming themselves and meeting force with force. The Bureau of Investigation feared violent protest. According to Ellis, “The riot and the government’s inaction destroyed the faith of many individuals in the possibility of the United States ever making space for black people to enjoy full citizenship, equal rights, and dignity.”⁷⁷ For years afterward, African Americans would point to this massacre as a prime example of white depravity and intransigence.

Meanwhile, whites too were unable to ignore the significance of the paradox. One northern white editorialist pointed to it directly:

Just as America was speeding up its noble and ideal effort to promote the world drift toward democracy, out walked the national skeleton from its closet and paraded before all the world the special weakness that our democracy has developed.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*, 540.

⁷⁶ Harrison, *When Africa Awakes*, 14-15. Quoted in Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 43.

⁷⁷ Ellis, *Race, War and Surveillance*, 38; 43.

⁷⁸ Northern paper, quoted in *Crisis*, Oct. 1917, cited in Dray, 235.

According to Dray, a “substantial amount of the national press coverage compared events in East St. Louis to stories of German atrocities in Belgium.” Dray sees such comparisons demonstrating that the war was generating a new perspective on “America’s race crimes.”⁷⁹

The East St. Louis riot and the lynching of Ell Persons outside Memphis, taken together, are the two paradigms of white mob murder in this period – in one case, the lynching of an individual for a single transgression, and in the other a generalized attack on an entire population for threatening to disrupt and rearrange the social/economic/political/racial order.⁸⁰ Both were explored on the national stage, and used by all sides as prime examples of the race problems the country faced. Ell Person’s murder followed the lynching script, and the massacre in East St. Louis represented a newer, but already stylized formula, a variation on what had happened in Wilmington and Atlanta in recent decades, but not, in the end, so very different in essence from the New York City Draft Riots of 1863. The Red Summer riot in Washington would represent a new variation, both in the emergence of violence and in the black response.

Black Officers’ Training and the Draft

That summer, after a great deal of wrangling, the War Department opened an officers’ training camp in Des Moines, Iowa for black men. There were fourteen other officer training camps around the country, none of which was open to black men. Camp Des Moines was mainly a sop, in recognition of the dangers to the war effort if black leaders refused to promote service and loyalty. Despite the hesitations of some white commentators and citizens, the War Department was clear all along that it would need

⁷⁹ Dray, *Persons Unknown*, 235. Presumably he means among whites.

⁸⁰ See Brundage’s taxonomy of lynchings, in *Lynching in the New South*, Chapter 1.

black men for this undertaking, and further, according to Ellis, that black support for the war was necessary to the maintenance of domestic order.⁸¹ A number of African American leaders had to be convinced that a separate camp, which so clearly reinforced the anathema of segregation and jim crow, was better than no training at all for black officers. Colonel Charles Young, the highest ranking black officer in the armed services and himself a graduate of West Point, supported the camp. He convinced Du Bois and others it was better than the alternative – i.e. nothing – which would mean that black soldiers would be commanded only by white men. Despite his own “legendary” service with the 10th Cavalry, Young himself was never allowed to fight in Europe, due to the refusal of the president (and his war department) to place white officers under black commanders. Young was forced to retire in light of what were almost certainly trumped up medical problems. African Americans were indignant about Young’s treatment; it was one of the things they pointed to as evidence of the military’s bad faith in dealing with black soldiers. Du Bois said that because of his superior ability and experience, the “Negro-haters” in the Army brass, who were against the training and commissioning of black officers, feared Young “above all.”⁸²

For the most part, and to a considerable extent probably because of Young’s support for it, African Americans who supported service came around to the idea of a separate camp for black officers, though many leaders remained convinced it was a mistake to concede to segregation in this or any case. Ultimately there was a great deal of pride in and celebration of the men who went to the camp. Most were black college

⁸¹ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance* xvi.

⁸² Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 66-68; Du Bois, “An Essay Toward a History of the Black Man in the Great War,” in David Lewis, ed., *Du Bois Reader* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 706, passim; Lewis, *Du Bois*, 532-34; Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 51-52.

chased out of the service by white superior officers, who charged them with cowardice and incompetence at every opportunity.⁸⁵

When the U.S. entered the war, there were black men in separate regiments of the regular army and the National Guard. The army never intended to use black regulars in France; to the disappointment of many in and out of the army, authorities reserved European service for draftees and National Guardsmen. Black regular army regiments were posted in the Philippines and along the Mexican border in Arizona and Texas.⁸⁶ Ultimately, the United States government drafted more than 340,000 black men. Another 60,000 or more served as volunteers, as part of National Guard units, and as regular Army troops. Of the more than 200,000 black men who served in France, some 2,000 fought in the trenches.⁸⁷ Of these the majority were National Guardsmen. According to Barbeau and Henri, most black draftees and volunteers entered the war with minimal training, due to white army officers' reluctance or refusal to treat them on a par with their white fellows, and to those fellows' strident and often violent objections to any hint of equity in training camps. Harry Haywood describes a fairly intensive training program for his regiment, but also asserts repeatedly that the military clearly wanted black soldiers to fail, and that in addition to the demoralizing treatment they received, many were clearly sent to fight unprepared.⁸⁸ Slotkin, however, claims that black officers, at least, received training on a par with whites', such as it was.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 56, passim; Ellis, 50, passim. For details on the camp and on treatment of black officers by white superiors overseas, see Du Bois, "Great War"; Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 87-88, 255, 258, passim.

⁸⁶ Barbeau and Henri, *ibid.*, 27.

⁸⁷ Tuttle, *Race Riot*, 217.

⁸⁸ Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, Chapter 2.

⁸⁹ Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 260.

The camps were segregated, and the army had a “safe ratio” policy, whereby the proportion of white to black men in a given camp must be no less than two to one. Black trainees were marginalized in every possible way, from living and eating arrangements to work and training assignments. They were rarely and only to a limited extent allowed access to the morale boosting amenities available to other soldiers, such as YMCA huts and recreational opportunities, and they were subject, generally without recourse, to the harshest kinds of verbal and physical mistreatment their fellow conscripts and many of their officers could dream up.⁹⁰ Harry Haywood’s brother Otto was stationed in Virginia in the “terribly cold winter of 1917-18.” He and other new arrivals at the camp

were forced to live in tents without floors or stoves. In most cases, they had only a blanket, some not even that. New arrivals to the camp were forced to stand around fires outside all night or sleep under trees for partial protection from the weather. For months there were no bathing facilities nor clothing for the men.⁹¹

The men’s protests eventually led to investigation and conditions were improved, but the initial treatment left bitterness and resentment among the men, their loved ones, and others with whom they communicated. In addition, black troops in training camps were frequently subject to discrimination and insult if not actual physical danger when they ventured into surrounding towns, particularly if they were stationed in one of the many camps located in the South.

Whatever degree of hope the war had seemed to present in terms of opportunity for equality and advancement in the military was difficult to sustain in the training camps. Black soldiers’ morale was generally low, and in their communications with

⁹⁰ Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 39-42; 50-52; Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 85-92; Du Bois, “Great War,” passim.

⁹¹ Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 79.

friends, families, and black leaders and publications they often complained and described how they and their cohorts were treated. They were dismayed by rumors that the Army intended to use them only for labor and not combat. The fact that “they got the worst sanitation, medical attention, clothing, shelter, and food, and were 19 percent more likely to fall ill than white soldiers”⁹² fed black discontent and the feeling among many that there would never be a way to convince whites that black citizens were worthy of fair treatment – or of simply being left alone.

As war preparations mounted, an increasing number of black people were busy with other kinds of issues: migration was on the rise, which meant upheaval both for those who left and for those who stayed behind. The latter who did not migrate faced multiple strains as well. The push factors that sent so many north were in some ways intensified for those left behind by the very fact of out-migration, especially in many areas where white anxiety and anger grew in reaction to the idea or reality of black workers’ departure. Further, the war exerted various pressures, perhaps primarily through the draft. The fact that so many southern black men were drafted could be seen as evidence that the war actually had an inordinate effect on the lives of rural black southerners, both in real terms – the loss, temporary or not, of a family member to military service – and in more abstract ways.

Nationalistic propaganda in support of the war, as well as debates among African American leaders, were unlikely to be as pertinent to many rural black people as the machinations of local draft boards, law enforcement, and employers. Of the nearly 24 million men registered for the draft in 1917, 9.63 percent (2.3 million) were black. In the first call, about a million black men were examined, and more than half (about 52% –

⁹² Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 88.

557,000) of black registrants were put into Class I, meaning they were immediately available for the draft. About a third of whites were placed in the same category at that time (32.5%, or 3.1 out of 9.5 million). And of the 556,917 African American men placed in Class I, 36 percent were inducted; of the 3,110,659 whites, 24 percent. Of course, more whites had enlisted of their own volition, and the overall percentage of black men who served was “a more reasonable 12.6 percent,” but it’s worth noting that they were only 10.19 percent of total registrants, and that many black men who tried to enlist voluntarily were turned away, so that only about 4,000 were accepted.⁹³

The irony is that the very same prejudices that lay behind initial white objections to their inclusion in the draft were the reason blacks were inducted in proportionately greater numbers.⁹⁴ Most black draftees came from southern states where draft boards were all white. Ellis notes that “by the end of the war, five southern states, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina, had drafted more blacks than whites.”⁹⁵ Men who would have been deemed unfit for service for physical reasons had they been white were frequently signed up, sometimes because their disabilities were seen by white draft boards as inherent in the race rather than specific to the individual, and at others because the boards knew – or assumed – African Americans would not be fighting, but would rather be doing the same sort of menial work in the army that they

⁹³ Charles H. Williams, *Sidelights on Negro Soldiers* (Boston: Brimmer, 1923), cited in Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 212 n. 8. Apparently black enlistments were limited due to “lack of facilities to receive them,” probably due to the segregationist organization of training camps and the “safe ratio” policy.

⁹⁴ Barbeau and Henri, 36. For more details, see Ellis, p 76-79 on draft board prejudice and black draft evasion, as well as Barbeau and Henri, Chapter 3 in general, including draft board specifics and malfeasance by southern employers and local law enforcement, whereby for example in some places illiterate black men were kept ignorant of draft regulations, often because employers did not want to give up their labor, and in some cases they would be picked up or turned in and fined (the money to be deducted from soldiers’ pay) for delinquency, desertion, and the employer or county official would get that money as a reward. (37)

⁹⁵ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 76.

were doing at home. And as for other obstacles, “some boards ingeniously justified designating southern black men with dependents as Class I because army pay was equal to, or exceeded, their normal monetary earnings, meaning that their dependents would be better off with the men in uniform.”⁹⁶ Despite government propaganda and the hope held by some blacks that the war would be an opportunity for gains in citizenship rights, the prejudice and frequent iniquity in black men’s experience of the draft foreshadowed the treatment they were to receive once inducted.

And then in August of 1917 came another riot. Black regular army soldiers of the Third Battalion of the decorated 24th Infantry marched into Houston. After weeks of humiliation, assault, and jim crow conditions, one of their number had been beaten and shot at by police upon inquiring after another member of the battalion, imprisoned for intervening in the beating of a black woman by a policeman. “Moving in assault formation,” these experienced soldiers killed sixteen whites, including five policemen, and wounded eleven. Reports on black casualties vary: two or four were killed, and they may have been soldiers.⁹⁷

Sixty-three of the men were brought to courts-martial before the end of the year, and thirteen were hurried to execution, with no opportunity for appeal. Sixteen more were later sentenced to death. Six of them were hung, the others given life imprisonment. The contrast between this summary trial and punishment and the relative laxity of the investigation of East St. Louis was not lost on African Americans. Houston joined East St. Louis as an exemplar and rallying cry in the burgeoning civil rights movement. The

⁹⁶ Ellis, *ibid.*; Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 35.

⁹⁷ Lewis, *Du Bois*, 540; Ellis, 46-47; Barbeau and Henri, 28-29; Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 43-45.

“broad pro-war consensus” that had existed among many black leaders was falling apart, and clearly there was “disenchantment at the grassroots.”⁹⁸

The black soldiers’ riot in Houston was in many ways simply an extreme reaction to what was going on everywhere the country, especially in the South, in training camps and surrounding areas where black men were in service. Conflict was frequent between white and black soldiers inside the camps, as were problems between black servicemen and local whites. Harry Haywood’s unit arrived in Houston not long after the mutiny of the Twenty-fourth, having left Chicago “in an angry and apprehensive mood.” He describes the train trip down as a series of confrontations between provocative black soldiers, many of whom had never been south, and outraged local “crackers,” which always stopped just short of outright battle, usually thanks to the efforts of black officers.⁹⁹

But once they were in Houston the soldiers found a chastised white populace and an empowered black one. “To our surprise, the confrontation with the Twenty-fourth seemed to have bettered the racial climate of this typical Southern town.” In six months they had no real trouble with white locals, as they enjoyed the hospitality of black Houston. During their training, black officers “lost no opportunity to lecture us on the importance of race loyalty and race pride.” Their officers were determined to prove to the brass that black soldiers would perform as well or better for black officers as white.

We men didn’t let our officers down. We were out to show the whites that not only were we as good in everything as they, but better. . . . Of course, there was no socializing between Blacks and whites, but it was clear that we had the respect, if not the friendship, of many of the white soldiers in the division. In fact, despite all the efforts of the

⁹⁸ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 46.

⁹⁹ Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 45-49.

command, there was a certain degree of solidarity between Black and white soldiers in our division...Many of us felt that in the case of a showdown in town with the local crackerdom, we could get support from some of the white members of our division who happened to be around. At least, we felt they would not side with the crackers against us.¹⁰⁰

In October 1917, the 15th New York was stationed in the hostile territory of Spartanburg, South Carolina. The mayor of the city had already written New York papers to threaten violence if black New Yorkers, whom he predicted would expect “to be treated like white men” were stationed in the camp which the city had avidly petitioned the federal government to build. Colonel Hayward, the white commander of the 15th (which when federalized would become the 369th Infantry of the 93rd (Provisional) Division, the famous Harlem Hellfighters), following the War Department’s directives and perhaps taking extra care in the wake of Houston, asked his men to conform to the jim crow practices of the community. He asked them to promise not to retaliate when insulted or physically attacked, and warned them that they should expect both. Hayward said that Spartanburg’s whites were probably threatening violence because of the Houston “riot” and that the men ought to excuse whites’ “unfriendly attitude...upon the grounds of ignorance and misunderstanding.” Further,

[s]outhern people did not appreciate the fact that the colored man of New York was a different man [from] the colored man of the South – different in education, different in social, business, and community status, different in his bearing a sense of responsibility and obligation to civilization.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 49-51.

¹⁰¹ Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 113-16; Hayward quote is on 116.

Slotkin believes that this “problematic appeal” worked with the men of the 15th because they believed with Hayward that southern blacks were inferior to those of the north, that this class-based appeal was effective because his men felt they were part of the middle class and their self-respect placed them above desiring to patronize businesses that did not welcome them. Though this may have been true for some of the men, there was probably a range of attitudes and responses to Hayward’s explanation, just as there was a range of class and regional backgrounds among his men (a certain number were southern-born migrants, for instance). Whatever they may have thought about Hayward’s characterization of southerners, black and white, the men agreed to his request, most likely because they knew one thing was certain: if they had trouble with the whites of Spartanburg, they, like the men of the 24th in Houston, would be the ones punished, no matter who might be actually to blame. Furthermore, they wanted to fight, and knew that the army, excessively reluctant as it was to designate black troops for combat, would use any excuse to keep them from it. Violence against American citizens would be far more than enough for that.¹⁰²

Within two weeks black soldiers were marching in the streets of Spartanburg, in an echo of Houston. Following a series of insults and violent incidents, rumors flew into the camp that two black soldiers had been hanged by white city policemen. A platoon of forty or fifty armed men marched in formation into the city, but they did not shoot anyone and were intercepted by their commander as they were awaiting the report of an inquiry at the jail by two of their number, who were allowed to search it. Hayward also investigated while the men waited in formation, and found that there had been no lynching. He and his men marched back to the camp with no incident, apparently because

¹⁰² Ibid., 117.

the townspeople had no idea of the reason for the platoon's assembly. There were other incidents but no major violence, and the regiment was able to sail for France and eventually join with the rest of the 93rd Division, to serve with honor under French command.¹⁰³

In yet another variation, an incident involving members of the black 92nd and their white commander took place the following spring in Kansas. In this case the kaleidoscope of race relations produced a different picture. In March 1918, while training at the segregated Camp Funston in Kansas, a black sergeant – barred from the white-only “amusement zone” in the camp – had attempted to buy a theater ticket in town. Discrimination was prohibited by law in the state, and the sergeant was within his rights, but he was refused admittance, and he protested. General C.C. Ballou, commanding officer of the division, responded to the incident by issuing a bulletin reprimanding the sergeant for starting trouble even though “he is strictly within his legal rights in this matter, and the theater manager is legally wrong.” Ballou told his men that they should “refrain from going where their presence will be resented,” and that it was “not a question of legal rights, but a question of policy.” They should “place the general interest of the division above personal pride and gratification.... White men made the division, and they can break it just as easily if it becomes a troublemaker.”¹⁰⁴ Ballou's reputation among blacks in and out of the service would never recover from this insult, exacerbated as it was by a follow-up address where he told his troops

I simply *will not* tolerate having the success of this camp,
with all that success means to your race, ruined by the acts
of a selfish and conceited handful of men who are so puffed

¹⁰³ Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 119-22. A similar incident had also occurred in September, in Newport News, Virginia. Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 86.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 79; Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 86.

up by a little prospective importance that personal considerations and petty social pride and ambition have entirely obscured the great issue of demonstrating physical, mental and moral fitness for the responsibilities of commanders and leaders of men.¹⁰⁵

Until this point, Ballou had been reasonably popular among African American troops; he had commanded the black officers' training camp in Des Moines, and was welcomed as the commander of a black division, according to some accounts.¹⁰⁶ But his insistence on black soldiers' meekly conceding to unfair treatment beyond what they already tolerated in the armed forces, and his failure to understand how that insistence undermined the very enterprise he espoused, discredited him with most from that time forward. His action in this episode was an issue around the nation; the NAACP protested it in the pages of the *New York Times*.¹⁰⁷ One black Harlem Democrat boss wrote the *New York World* that Ballou's order would "do more harm than the work of 10,000 German propagandists."¹⁰⁸

Hayward and Ballou both asked their black troops to accept discrimination, insult, and hatred from local whites for the sake of what they defined as the greater good. Both conceded that the behavior of the local racists was wrong, but reminded their men how tenuous their own status was in order to rationalize the need to accept the status quo. But they differed in a key point. Hayward appealed to his men's pride and self respect – and also their own prejudices. Ballou deplored that pride, calling it petty and selfish. The cases were different in other ways, of course: Hayward's men were all volunteers, while most of Ballou's were conscripts; Hayward's exhortations were preemptive and Ballou's

¹⁰⁵ Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 87.

¹⁰⁶ In his "Essay Toward a History of the Great War," though, Du Bois bemoans Ballou having command of the 92nd rather than Young, calls Ballou "timid" and "changeable," and describes him tolerating as well as perpetrating racist insults to black officers and soldiers. (Du Bois, "Great War," 707, *passim*, in Lewis, *Du Bois Reader*)

¹⁰⁷ Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 87.

¹⁰⁸ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 79.

came after trouble had begun, in the form of reprimand rather than request. And the timing was different: between August of 1917 and March 1918 the pressures of wartime intensified. These factors are not strictly measurable, but the most significant difference between the two incidents was in the outcome. Ballou's memo received national attention, at least in black papers, while Hayward's request to his men seems not to have traveled far outside their immediate circle. These men were not distressed by their commander's words – or not enough to publicize them as outrageous; though as it happened they did not adhere to his request, they didn't publicly denounce it as they could have. In the case of Ballou on the other hand the response was indignation, no doubt partly because of the harsh tone he took.

But the difference was also surely due to the passage of time – the seven months between August and March brought black soldiers across the Atlantic and into the war, either as fighters or laborers. News of their experiences fed growing black awareness and anger at home over how they were being treated. When Ballou issued his memo that March, the men of the 369th (the New York 15th, once federalized) who had marched through Spartanburg were serving with the French, destined to receive accolades and honors.¹⁰⁹ But before they were transferred to French command, the “Harlem Hellfighters” had nearly gone into battle against an Alabama regiment at another camp in the U.S.; they had twice embarked and returned because their ship was so decrepit; and after finally landing in France had been “put to work building railroads and dock facilities” for two months. Their experiences were widely known at home – white officers as well as black troops wrote home about their travails. One of the former was Hamilton Fish, Jr., whose famous father had his letters published in papers like the *New York*

¹⁰⁹ Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 129.

Times.¹¹⁰ Awareness of such treatment certainly affected black attitudes and responses to continuing instances of discrimination.

Hayward and Ballou were white officers in command of black soldiers, who seemed to want their men to succeed in the service. They did not hesitate to point to the hegemony of white racism, nor even to acknowledge injustice, and yet called on their soldiers to forbear. The status quo was never in question, and it was not to be addressed except as a condition of existence. For blacks who went into the service at least partly in hopes of changing that status quo this attitude amongst their white “friends” was growing less and less acceptable. Black men in the service, along with their friends and families at home, understood the army’s treatment in training camps and overseas as politically significant. They frequently connected their personal grievances to larger political critiques.

The U.S. military’s open and unapologetic discrimination against black soldiers was particularly frustrating because so many African Americans looked on the idea of service with the hope that it represented an opportunity for black men to be on relatively equal footing with whites, to exercise and exhibit black manhood on a large stage where it might have a corrective effect. Like Wilson’s obvious disregard for black aspirations once he took office, the army’s undisguised intention to use black men for dirty work and little else was a source of bitterness and disgust. In each case, those African Americans who had for various reasons allowed themselves and/or convinced others to believe that change was in the wind and that service would force recognition of their rights were pushed into deeper alienation. The war experience at home and abroad was in general no more than a further, and often intensified, manifestation of entrenched U.S. racial

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 123-28.

injustice. In fact, in many ways the war exacerbated already intolerable conditions. It fed the impulse toward a New Negro politics of manhood and action, and also the Garveyite push for self determination and racial separation.

“Negro Subversion”

In the context of the war, the fear of subversion was real and widespread. The anti-German feeling and general nativism of the period are well-known – radical dissent in general was seen as pro-German, no matter what the cause. Americans of German extraction were looked on with great distrust by their neighbors. Many were interned, others expelled, while still others if they could changed their names and moved. Rumors and fears of German agents infiltrating and subverting ordinary people approached hysterical levels. When it came to African Americans, even those whites who believed in the rightfulness of black subordination recognized that a group of people so generally subjugated could reasonably be receptive to anti-American propaganda. The understanding that African Americans had real grounds to wish for change combined with migration and other manifestations of their political and social discontent to feed such fears, within the government and among the white populace.¹¹¹

Mark Ellis describes a “black spy scare” in the spring and summer of 1917. Growing fears of German subversion linked up with longstanding prejudices in the minds of some whites as both a focus for anxiety and a convenient explanation for African American demands. Blacks around the nation responded to imputations of their susceptibility to German propaganda with derision, assertions of loyalty, and frequently with cogent critiques of white motivations. With Johnson, many believed that white southerners “would like to have the people of the North believe [reports of successful

¹¹¹ Kornweibel, *Seeing Red*, passim.

German agitation among blacks], so as to excuse themselves for acts of violence they would like to commit.”¹¹² Accusations of disloyalty were added to rape and criminality as excuses for white violence. In fact, Ellis points out that “black scare” complaints often turned out to have similar roots as many lynchings: a dispute between white and black persons could now become the basis for a report of disloyalty. He posits that this displacement could account for the drop in lynching figures for 1917.¹¹³

The question among black citizens as to whether they truly owed allegiance and service to a government that would countenance the utter savagery of East St. Louis and the obvious injustice of Houston was wide open, especially in the larger context of epidemic lynching across the South. There is no evidence, however, that many African Americans truly considered allegiance to Germany. There were other, more feasible political alternatives right at home. But government officials viewed the black reaction to East St. Louis and other violence in 1917 with alarm, and responded in two ways: one, by bringing black personnel into the War Department in a liaison capacity and working to build a dialogue with black leaders, and two, by the “massive expansion of intelligence-gathering on the African-American population.”¹¹⁴ Ellis’ “black scare” provided cover, if not rationale, for the latter undertaking.

In looking at the federal government’s treatment of black journalists, leaders, activists, and political groups, during and after the war, Theodore Kornweibel shows that there was widespread and serious concern over the emerging African American politics of entitlement and demand in this period.¹¹⁵ Agencies ranging from the Office of Naval

¹¹² *Boston Herald*, 4/9/1917, quoted in Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 12.

¹¹³ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 28-29.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

¹¹⁵ Kornweibel, *Seeing Red*, passim.

Intelligence (ONI) to the newly formed Bureau of Investigation (which would become the FBI) and the Postal Service as well as the army's Military Intelligence Division (MID) monitored black publications, meetings, and other activities looking for signs of criminal, seditious, or subversive action. In his examination of voluminous government documents, Kornweibel describes the "easy" transformation of wartime worries about possible German influence into the postwar fear of Bolshevism among African Americans. The reason for the anxiety was the same in both cases: African Americans appeared to be ripe targets for subversive propaganda because of their generally disadvantaged status, and also, in the minds of those who saw them as intellectually and morally inferior, because they lacked the resources to resist the pernicious influence of German and Communist persuaders. Of a piece with the latter white supremacist assumption was the certainty that contemporary black ideas and rhetoric of self determination and civil rights – what Kornweibel calls "black militancy" – could not have been *sui generis* but had to be the product of white influences. The counterintelligence community generally believed, furthermore, that this "militancy could be inspired only by renegade whites – particularly communists and anarchists – not by domestic social, economic, or political conditions." He also points to the agencies' inability to distinguish between rhetoric and action when they were looking at these subjects.¹¹⁶

Walter Howard Loving was a retired black soldier who had served with distinction in the Philippines and sought a further commission with the army in early March of 1917, hoping to command black volunteers. Instead he was enlisted as a "Negro Subversion" specialist in the Military Intelligence Bureau (MIB), and set to watching the

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3-5, 60, 27; Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 58.

activities and gauging the sentiments of African Americans, mostly in Washington, D.C. and Harlem. Loving was a complicated figure: he was deeply loyal to the government and responsive to the commands of a bureaucracy that generally held and operated on the basis of negative assumptions about black people. At the same time he was not a self-hating black man, nor would he have wanted to be thought of as a “white man’s negro,” as one of his superiors described him. Rather, it seems from much of his writing that Loving thought it was his job to promote understanding, literally, and to try and fight the spread of black discontent – by undermining black activities which he saw as destructive, certainly, but also by combating white prejudice. He may in fact have been an inactive member of the NAACP, whose work he referred to as “a glorious cause.” He was open with his superior officers about his allegiance, writing in one report: “I am most loyal to the race with which I am identified.” In spite of such statements, he does not seem to have raised suspicions among his white commanders. He investigated numerous charges of seditious or dangerous activity among blacks, and in many – perhaps most – cases found that the charges were either unfounded or exaggerated.¹¹⁷

In addition to gathering information and conferring with and advising black leaders and organizations, Loving also spoke at public gatherings “to bolster black loyalty and demonstrate it to the white populace.” He was an advocate for African Americans, both implicitly, by dispelling rumors of nefarious activity among them, and actively, by showing real reasons for black discontent and anger and arguing for the strategic (not just moral) importance of righting such wrongs. In one of his reports on the effects of East St. Louis, he pleaded with the War Department: “Is there not some way by which we may reassure the colored people [of the South] that the government will take

¹¹⁷ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 58.

all steps to bring to justice the perpetrators of this awful crime?" This was in early December of 1917, just at the same time as the first group of courts martial for the Houston "mutiny" were underway, and prior to the executions which would be so demoralizing for African American civilians and soldiers alike.¹¹⁸

The subversion the government feared was a real thing, only it wasn't a revolutionary movement per se. It was the expression of a growing spirit among African Americans, what some were referring to as the "New Negro," but which found more than one outlet, including the socialism of black members of the I.W.W. and the ideology of self determination of the fast-growing, largely working-class Garvey movement. While there was a certain amount of what might be called anti-Americanism in some quarters, especially among the socialists, such revolutionary ideology was no more prevalent among blacks than whites, and was ultimately less compelling for the former than other, less extremist politics. African Americans were defining a politics based on the idea that they were citizens of the nation and therefore entitled to all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of citizenship. This was one reason that military service and general support for the war effort such as buying liberty bonds was so important, rhetorically and actually: these acts demonstrated the acceptance of responsibility, and grounded claims to rights and privileges. The emerging politics of entitlement and demand among African Americans was indeed subversive in its way, because it asserted the rightful equality and humanity of black citizens. Such a formulation was undoubtedly threatening to the established order, but not literally revolutionary.

In an internationalist spirit, Du Bois pointed to the exigencies and consequences for "the darker races" of a worldwide struggle. He had argued in support of the Allied

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 57-60, 71

cause from the beginning of the war, and with U.S. entry into the conflict he called on his readers to support the call to arms, notwithstanding, in Ellis' words, "Woodrow Wilson's lack of concern for black people."¹¹⁹ In July of 1918, as black anger at continuing insults and abuses mounted, Du Bois published his famous "Close Ranks" editorial. "This is the crisis of the world," he wrote,

We of the colored race have no ordinary interest in the outcome. That which the German power represents today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and all the darker races for equality, freedom and democracy. Let us not hesitate. Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy. We make no ordinary sacrifice, but we make it gladly and willingly with our eyes lifted to the hills.¹²⁰

In taking this attitude toward black participation in the U.S. war effort, Du Bois was again claiming citizenship, asserting that African Americans were Americans first and foremost, and their duty to country was not eclipsed by the subordinate status they rejected. Other black leaders, and members of immigrant groups too, used the war to combat the exclusion of their group from American identity. But some black leaders and commentators were appalled by Du Bois' exhortation.¹²¹ In the *Messenger*, A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen had consistently called on blacks to excuse themselves from the nation's call until they could stand as full equals with other Americans. Those leaders who supported the war should "volunteer to go to France, if they are so eager to

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 1.

¹²⁰ Du Bois, "Close Ranks," *Crisis* (July 1918), in Lewis, *Du Bois Reader*, p. 697. The "insults and abuses" included the riot at East St. Louis in July 1917, the swift executions of black "mutineers" in Houston, the increase in lynchings, mistreatment of black officers and enlisted men, etc. See Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*; Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*.

¹²¹ Especially because they believed his real motivation for this position was selfish: he had been offered a captaincy in the Military Intelligence Bureau. See Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*, 553-560; Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 166-168.

make the world safe for democracy. We would rather fight to make Georgia safe for the Negro.”¹²² The *Washington Bee*, too, calling them “bootlickers,” had agreed that black leaders who supported the war effort ought to volunteer themselves. For the latter, and for others less politically radical than socialists like Randolph and Owen, it seemed all too clear that falling in would be a suckers’ move, going along with another in the long series of bait and switch operations that the nation had played on its black citizens.

Scholars seem to agree, however, that to the extent they concerned themselves with it, most African Americans were not against the war, nor opposed to black men fighting, at least initially. Indeed, Barbeau and Henri believe that most agreed with Du Bois – or at least they did not disagree too strenuously.¹²³ As time went on though, and evidence mounted of black soldiers being mistreated and abused, and while violence against blacks at home increased, initial suspicions and cynicism as to the benefits of loyalty and service were confirmed. Whether or not they fully embraced the dominant jingoism of the day, and whatever became of the initial enthusiasm for service among some, blacks were at the very least pragmatic, and with Johnson¹²⁴ understood that with so much already against them at home, it was impractical to open themselves up to the charges and consequences of apparent pro-Germanism.¹²⁵

Overseas

When black soldiers went overseas, their experience further reinforced for them and for those left behind that white racial attitudes and practices were intractable. Harry Haywood’s experience as a combat troop serving with the French appears to have been

¹²² *Messenger*, Nov. 1917, 31.

¹²³ Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 12.

¹²⁴ Johnson had stated at the start of the war, “the bald truth is that the Negro cannot afford to be rated as a disloyal element in this nation.” (See page 15)

¹²⁵ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 5-9.

typical. His training was both empowering and infuriating, encompassing as it did institutional and circumstantial racism as well as the excitement of having black officers and fellow soldiers who did not bow to it but rather set themselves to undermining it at every turn. In France he found – along with the exigencies of war – a populace generally disposed to welcome him and other black soldiers freely as well as an army hierarchy determined to sabotage that disposition.¹²⁶ After being in France, “I felt that I could never again adjust myself to the conditions of Blacks in the States after the spell of freedom from racism in France. I did not want to go back and my feeling was shared by many Black soldiers.”¹²⁷

There were two black combat divisions in the American Expeditionary Forces, the 92nd and the 93rd (Provisional), so called because it never reached full divisional strength. The latter’s four regiments, three composed of National Guardsmen and one of draftees, served under French command. General Pershing had agreed to bolster the Allies’ devastated forces with four combat regiments, and was more than willing to part with troops he and other U.S. military leaders assumed would be substandard. The French, accustomed to black soldiers since they had regiments from their African colonies already engaged, had no objection to the African American troops. These men served with distinction, earning accolades and numerous decorations from the French, including hundreds of Croix de Guerre citations.¹²⁸

The 92nd was less fortunate: its commander, General C.C. Ballou, was hamstrung by a feud with his commanding officer, who hated Ballou personally and was an ardent racist, determined to see the black soldiers fail and unhesitating in positioning them for

¹²⁶ Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, Chapter 2, passim.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹²⁸ Du Bois, “Great War,” in Lewis, *Du Bois Reader*, 711-19.

disaster.¹²⁹ Ballou himself had not been in an ideal position with his black troops since the publication of his memo in April, which provoked massive outrage among African Americans. For this and other reasons, morale was low when the 92nd arrived in France in June 1918. Its troops had never even assembled as a division, because of the army's unwillingness to gather too many black soldiers in one place on U.S. soil.¹³⁰ The division was under supplied and under trained at all levels – some regiments were working with as little as one-tenth the number of horses they needed, and men in the artillery regiments had had no experience firing their weapons, having been forbidden from doing so stateside. Furthermore, many of their black officers' training had been severely limited, some of them having been called overseas before they had completed artillery school. On arrival in France, rather than completing their training, many of the men were put to work doing manual labor, which further demoralized soldiers expecting to fight, however unprepared they may have been.¹³¹

Over the course of its service in France and after Armistice the 92nd Division was dogged with accusations of cowardice and incompetency among its black officers, who made up 82 percent of the division's commanders upon entry to the war and 58 by the end. Later investigations showed that many of the charges against them were fabricated. The entire division was castigated after the failure of one regiment, the 368th to prevail under circumstances likely to have overwhelmed any unit.¹³² Du Bois would later investigate and show through documents and testimony that the white command had

¹²⁹ Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 137-38; Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*, 535-36. See also, Du Bois, "Great War," in Lewis, *Du Bois Reader*, 719-30.

¹³⁰ Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 82.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 139-42. See also, Du Bois, "Great War" in Lewis, *Du Bois Reader*; Haywood's description of his brother Otto's experience in a labor battalion, 78-80.

¹³² Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 283-89; Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 150-52, 172; see also, J.E. Cutler, "Race Riots in Washington, D.C." Memo for the Director of Military Intelligence, "Negro Subversion" file, 10218-350, RG 165, National Archives.

conspired to impede and discredit black combat troops overseas. As he explained it, “white officers fought more valiantly against Negroes than they did against the Germans.”¹³³ Haywood echoes those sentiments throughout his description of his army experience.¹³⁴

One of the documents in particular created an uproar, and provides a striking example of the army’s efforts to undermine its black troops. In August of 1918 a confidential memo went out to the French command from Colonel Linard, a French liaison officer stationed at AEF Headquarters. Its subject was how to deal with the African American soldiers of the 93rd Division. The colonel warned against the too-complete integration of black American troops with the French. Offering French officers “an exact idea of the position occupied by Negroes in the United States,” Linard suggested that the French would be outside their “province” to question it, because “American opinion is unanimous on the ‘color question’ and does not admit of any discussion.” Noting the “menace of degeneracy” the growing black population represented in the U.S., Linard asserted that because they did not face the same danger the French had been “treating the Negro with familiarity and indulgence.” This treatment had become a source of “grievous concern to the Americans,” and indeed, “an affront to their national policy.”

Linard warned that white American officers were “afraid that contact with the French [would] inspire in black Americans aspirations which to [the whites] appear intolerable.” Going on to describe some of the beliefs about and limitations placed on

¹³³ Quoted in Schneider, “*We Return Fighting*”, 11.

¹³⁴ Haywood, Chapter 2; Du Bois, “Great War,” in Lewis, *Du Bois Reader*, 719-31.

African Americans, he asserted that “the vices of the Negro are a constant menace to the American who has to repress them sternly” and concluded that French officers

must prevent the rise of any pronounced degree of intimacy between French officers and black officers. We may be courteous and amiable with these last, but we cannot deal with them on the same plane as with the white American officers without deeply wounding the latter. We must not eat with them, must not shake hands or seek to talk or meet with them outside of the requirements of military service....We must not commend too highly the black American troops, particularly in the presence of [white] Americans....Make a point of keeping the native cantonment population from ‘spoiling’ the Negroes. [White] Americans become greatly incensed at any public expression of intimacy between white women with black men.¹³⁵

Although the memo was “secret,” it was widely distributed among French civil and military officials, some of whom were so offended by it that news of it appeared in the French press. According to Slotkin, “Harlem got word of it within the month.”¹³⁶

Providing as it did such flagrant evidence of official attitudes and efforts to discredit and impede black troops, the Linard memo had a significant effect on African American attitudes at home.

As an attempt to inculcate poisonous white American ideas of black male sexuality, to import, as it were, U.S. concepts of race into a context where other cultural understandings were dominant and preemptive, Linard’s effort was mostly unsuccessful; French attitudes and practices were generally unaffected, as Haywood found. But though many American and French officers disagreed with the directive and refused to enforce it, others complied. At least one American officer formally requested that civilian

¹³⁵ “Secret Information Concerning Black American Troops,” *Crisis Reader*, 350-51. See also Barbeau and Henri, *Unknow Soldiers*, 114-15; Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 253-255.

¹³⁶ Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 254.

authorities help prevent “harmful relationships,” by warning people that the African American men were dangerous to their women. This officer was apparently less worried about the Frenchwomen than the white American women who would face the former troops on their return.¹³⁷ This attitude, common among white Americans, would add fuel to the fire of violence and discrimination against black soldiers once they returned home.

In his narrative Haywood cites a “deliberate campaign conducted by the...American Command to influence French citizens against Blacks,” centering on efforts to “build up the Black rapist scare among them.” Tuskegee’s principal R.R. Moton came to France at the behest of the U.S. president and war secretary to investigate the charge that the black 92nd had taken to raping French women. He found one actual case in the division of 15,000 men. Rape “was no more common among coloured soldiers than among white, or any other soldiers.”¹³⁸ Du Bois also outlines a systematic and unsuccessful propaganda campaign by the U.S. military to convince the French that African American soldiers were rapists.¹³⁹

Even before they left France “the fear of their mingling with French people, especially French women,” was central to post-Armistice restrictions on black soldiers, which encouraged M.P.’s to be “ruthless.” Haywood says that in St. Lazare, where his brother had been stationed, “a black soldier seen on the street with a French woman was likely to be arrested by the MPs.”¹⁴⁰ [sic] Soon after the arrival of the black 369th in

¹³⁷ Ibid., 255. An “indignant” member of the French National Assembly read this document aloud in that body in July of 1919 to “exclamations of disapproval,” exacerbated no doubt by the examples he offered of mistreatment and abuse of black troops by white American soldiers and M.P.’s, “cases where blacks whom the French had decorated for bravery had subsequently been abused, beaten, and even murdered.” (Barbeau and Henri, 115)

¹³⁸ Haywood, 65-66. Moton quote is from his book, *Finding a Way Out*.

¹³⁹ Du Bois, “Great War,” in Lewis, *Du Bois Reader*, 731-32.

¹⁴⁰ Haywood, 79.

Brest to await embarkation for the U.S, a white officer, protesting the clubbing of one of his men, was informed

that M.P.'s had been told 'our "Niggers" were feeling their oats a bit and that instructions had been given to "take it out of them" quickly, just as soon as they arrived [at ports of embarkation] so as not to have any trouble later on.' [The officer] also learned that enlisted M.P.'s had been told they need not treat the black commissioned personnel of the regiment as officers.¹⁴¹

According to this report, the M.P.'s were not to salute or obey orders given by any officers in command of black troops, whether those officers were white or black. Black American units were excluded by their own General Headquarters from the Allied victory parade in Paris – while black colonials of both France and England marched.¹⁴²

By Haywood's account he, his brother, and many other black soldiers came out of their wartime experience disillusioned and embittered, but also determined to fight back against American racism.¹⁴³ Discriminated against at every turn, subject to humiliation, poor facilities and training, conspired against and sabotaged by their own countrymen and commanding officers, African American soldiers in France faced huge obstacles, whether they were in combat or labor battalions. Those who had begun with feelings of patriotism and sense of mission cannot have had an easy time sustaining them. Given the circumstances, the fact that they achieved as much as they did, on and off the battlefield, is remarkable. Historians looking at black soldiers in the Great War now agree that those who failed did so because their circumstances made success impossible. Furthermore, the triumphs came about against remarkable odds. Black stevedores loaded more ships with

¹⁴¹ Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 167.

¹⁴² Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 397; Barbeau and Henri, 166.

¹⁴³ Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 80, 83.

far greater speed than any others; their fellows in the Pioneers built roads and bridges which enabled the swift passage of troops to and from the front; the Harlem Hellfighters spent a remarkable 191 days in the trenches, only the most famous of thousands of African American troops who served with distinction and earned the highest French military honors; and hundreds of black officers overcame continuing attempts of their own compatriots to discredit and destroy them. These men fought and, by surviving and often prevailing, beat a homegrown enemy that was in many ways more destructive than the Germans could ever be. Little wonder that when they got back to the U.S. they were determined to try and gain the rewards and recognition they knew quite well would come hard if at all.

Homecoming

Having been subject in many cases to repeated delays in their departure from France, black soldiers received a mixed welcome once they got home. Black communities of any size celebrated them eagerly, and in some places (generally Northern cities, and most notably New York), they were greeted with respect and enthusiasm from all sides, at least at first. But in other locales they frequently met outright hostility, and sometimes violence. At least ten of the 76 recorded lynching victims in 1919 were black veterans: some were killed while wearing the uniform, and others as a direct consequence of making statements about having served.¹⁴⁴

Black war service, at home and abroad, “dramatically altered the racial climate on the homefront,” according to one historian; the evidence – and other scholars – support

¹⁴⁴ Dray, *Persons Unknown*, 247; Barbeau and Henri, *Unknow Soldiers*, 177-78.

this claim.¹⁴⁵ Pointing to burgeoning enrollment in black political organizations and readership of “radical” journals, Ellis asserts that “black political awareness, which had been increasing steadily in the pre-war years, grew apace during the war.”¹⁴⁶ By 1919, the NAACP’s *Crisis* had 100,000 readers.¹⁴⁷ In that year the Postmaster General banned Randolph and Owen’s *Messenger*, and Garvey’s *Negro World* was gaining readership among the working class by the minute. Five thousand people would show up for his rallies at the Palace Casino in Harlem.¹⁴⁸ The *Defender*’s circulation, which increased steadily during the war, was at 140,000 in March of 1919. This number included a substantial number of soldiers still posted overseas.¹⁴⁹ It is crucial to remember too that black publications were widely shared within families, workplaces, and communities, so the subscription and circulation numbers offer only a low-end estimation of their readership.

Though they may not all have called themselves “New Negroes” the majority of black NAACP members would at least have sympathized with the “spirit of defiance born of desperation” which James Weldon Johnson described, and an intensified race consciousness which his compatriot Alain Locke said was “spurred by the bitter disillusionments of post-war indifference...”¹⁵⁰ Johnson spoke to an NAACP rally at Carnegie Hall in January of 1919 about the American flag, which he said bore

the stains of Disfranchisement, of Jim Crowism, and of
Lynching....The record of black men on the fields of
France gives us the greater right to point to that flag and

¹⁴⁵ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 111.

¹⁴⁶ Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance*, 225. Other scholars corroborate this view.

¹⁴⁷ Schneider, *We Return Fighting*, 9.

¹⁴⁸ David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 37.

¹⁴⁹ Kornweibel, *Seeing Red*, 39.

¹⁵⁰ Both quoted in Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 187.

say to the nation: Those stains are still upon it; they dim its stars and soil its stripes; wash them out! wash them out!¹⁵¹

The connections between service and citizenship rights were clear to blacks across class as well as regional lines. Whites saw it too, with varying responses. Even the disappointing Woodrow Wilson managed to point it out, according to Barbeau and Henri, when he “complimented a group of blacks on the remarkable loyalty and patriotism of black Americans despite the unjust and illegal treatment they had received in the past.”¹⁵² Others were less celebratory, seeing black aspirations as dangerous pretensions brought on by an ill-advised inflation of their self regard. Senator Vardaman of Mississippi wrote in his *Weekly*

Every community in Mississippi ought to organize and the organization should be led by the bravest and best white men in the community. And they should pick out these suspicious characters – those military, French-women-ruined negro soldiers and let them understand that they are under surveillance and that when crimes similar to this [an unproved rape] are committed, take care of the individual who commits the crime.¹⁵³

The Ku Klux Klan, revived in 1915, became “very visible” once the war ended, parading in southern cities and towns. And according to the NAACP, which recorded and publicized such incidents, discharged black soldiers were driven out of towns across the south and west, by crowds which often included elected officials and other men of substance.¹⁵⁴

African Americans in and out of the service emerged from the war with feelings as mixed as those with which they had entered it. The war fed black pride as well as

¹⁵¹ Schneider, “*We Return Fighting*,” 8.

¹⁵² Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 189.

¹⁵³ Quoted in Barbeau and Henri, 177.

¹⁵⁴ NAACP *Report for 1919*, 39-40, in Barbeau and Henri, 175-76.

black anger; service and ill-treatment alike fed political and social demands. It was not just the likes of Du Bois or Haywood who pointed to black soldiers' experience as transformative. The change was apparent to observers from a range of perspectives. In a memo following the Washington riot, one Military Intelligence agent explained:

Many of the former colored officers and soldiers have returned to civil life cherishing grievances arising in the Army which they feel have been almost totally disregarded by the War Department. A considerable proportion of the colored officers and enlisted men who served in the 368th Infantry live in the District of ColumbiaThese officers and soldiers returning to their homes in Washington have told their grievances and, in some instances, as reported to this office, have boasted of their ability to handle guns and of their determination to use the arms in their possession rather than submit to unjust treatment.¹⁵⁵

Cutler was able to report this story in all its detail, the feelings it provoked, and connect it to the response to rioting whites in D.C. because black Washingtonians were so caught up in it, discussing it openly in meetings and from pulpits as well as in homes and workplaces. It was just one item on a long list, but it was particularly resonant in D.C. if only because, as Cutler explains, some of those who felt most wronged by the disgrace of the 92nd were Washingtonians.

African Americans in D.C. as around the nation saw military service as further proof of black manhood, of the courage and patriotism of black citizens. Even in the face of grave injustice at home, they had answered the call, whether as soldiers or as families and communities sacrificing precious resources to the national effort. They also saw it as further evidence, however superfluous, of the intransigence and profound immorality of

¹⁵⁵ J.E. Cutler, "Race Riots in Washington, D.C." Memo for the Director of Military Intelligence, "Negro Subversion" file, 10218-350, RG 165, National Archives. See also, Slotkin, 283-89; Barbeau and Henri, 150-52, 172; Du Bois, "Great War," 719-731.

white racism. In an interview with the *New York Times* which Du Bois had reprinted in the June 1918 issue of the *Crisis*, a black soldier serving with the 369th had expressed it thus:

Now is our opportunity to prove what we can do. If we can't fight and die in this war just as bravely as white men, then we don't deserve equality with white men....But if we can do things at the front; if we can make ourselves felt; if we can make America really proud of the Ole – th¹⁵⁶...then it will be the biggest possible step toward our equalization as citizens. The whole [regiment] has the same spirit.¹⁵⁷

Violence and mistreatment perpetrated against black soldiers by whites, both military and civilian, got a great deal of attention in the black press. Black commentators pointed to the lynching and beating of returned soldiers, and to the accounts of mistreatment by military officials – anecdotal as well as systematic (in letters and stories told by individuals, as well as reports like Du Bois') – as evidence of white savagery and obduracy. Both streams of thinking fed into a larger river, which had been building strength since before the war. As Du Bois put it in his much-quoted *Crisis* article, “Returning Soldiers,”

We are returning from war! *The Crisis* and tens of thousands of blackmen were drafted into a great struggle.... This is the country to which we Soldiers of Democracy return. This is the fatherland for which we fought! The faults of *our* country are *our* faults. Under similar circumstances, we would fight again. But by the God of heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that the war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land.

We return.

¹⁵⁶ The 15th Regiment of the NY National Guard, which had become the 369th when it was federalized with its division.

¹⁵⁷ Slotkin, *Lost Battalions*, 145.

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.¹⁵⁸

This essay was an ironic bookend for 1918's "Close Ranks," where he had called on African Americans to set aside racial grievances in order to stand as Americans. For Du Bois, the bitterness and disappointment of wartime treatment of blacks at home and abroad could only be redeemed by a steadfast refusal to allow the "forces of hell" to continue to have their way. A young former soldier would agree with him, writing months later to the *Washington Bee*, a black weekly,

During the war the Negro put every grievance behind him and dedicated himself whole-heartedly to the common task. Thoughtless of revenge, careless of slander, oblivious to all save love of God and trust of man, he gave to America and the world an example of highest patriotism. Behold him and admire him for that—but mistake not! There is a new thought in the younger minds, and, to be plain blunt, perhaps brutally frank, it approximates this:

We have labored in sweat and tears—we have pleaded and hoped in vain—we have been loyal in every crisis and died in wars without a winking—but henceforth our Loyalty is for sale and the price thereof is Justice. We are done forever with blind devotion to a mere geographical [sic] idea. America's ideals are worth more than she herself, to preserve them to Humanity is God's work. Those principles for which America stands and which she has preached to the world—those principles we support—those we cling to dearer than life, whether she betrays them or not. Henceforth our Loyalty is for sale—and the price thereof is Justice—no compromise—but Justice absolute and complete, without reservation and without restriction.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Du Bois, "Returning Soldiers," *Crisis* 18 (May 1919): 13-14, in Lewis, 578.

¹⁵⁹ D. Michel, letter to the editor, *Washington Bee*, 8/16/19.

The writer starts by saying back the rhetoric with which African Americans were exhorted by government and by some of their leaders to support the war effort, the ideas Du Bois had expressed in his “Close Ranks” editorial in July of 1918. But he goes on to express allegiance to the principles he identifies as most fundamental to the nation, ideals which the U.S. preaches to the world, and which are more important than the nation itself, especially because that nation does not live up to them, and in fact “betrays them.” Michel warns that although black people, soldiers and citizens, did as Du Bois and their government asked in 1917 and put country before self, at great cost, they would do so no longer. Obedience to the principles would not allow it.

The New Negro

The “New Negro” as such is in some ways a challenge to describe, because the term has been used to describe divergent ideas and agendas in this period. The term first emerged in the late nineteenth century, while more than one book by that title appeared in the early twentieth century. Scholars characterize the so-called “New Negro movement” variously: in some views it is primarily a cultural – and more specifically literary – phenomenon; others differ, seeing its importance instead as political or social. William Pickens’ 1916 book, *The New Negro*, “espoused a philosophy of protest, race pride, and cultural achievement,” which gives an accurate general description of what we might call the “New Negro inclination” of the teens and twenties, in whichever context. Of course the generality of the description dilutes it somewhat. It is also not quite accurate to call the New Negro a generational idea, because members of several succeeding generations identified with the term.

Some scholars describe W.E.B. Du Bois as the icon of the New Negro, while others point to the socialists A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, or to “economic nationalists” like Marcus Garvey and others who urged blacks to patronize only black businesses and professionals. The writer and philosopher Alain Locke is in some ways most closely associated with the term, having published in the mid-twenties a collection of writings by young African Americans under that title, and developed a coherent if not exclusive formulation of its meaning. Locke’s branch of the “movement” saw cultural achievement as the surest way to progress; Randolph and Owen’s “New Crowd Negro” looked to a manly defiance of white oppression and solidarity among black workers for deliverance – what Robin Kelley calls “a radical fusion of socialism and ‘race politics.’”¹⁶⁰ Du Bois’ “talented tenth” were “New Negroes” by definition. They espoused and promoted black education, political action, and economic empowerment, none of which were new to the black political agenda or specific to Du Boisians, but the assertiveness and entitlement of his project, its very impatience, were hallmarks of the moment. Though these and other conceptualizations, whether competing or congruent, are all part of the mix, what seems most important for our purposes is the fact that the New Negro was a powerful figuration for African Americans seeking to define and promote racial progress in the early twentieth century, and particularly after the war, and that its rhetorical starting point was the refusal any longer to ask for acceptance but rather to claim a rightful place.

The conceptualization and embrace of the “New” was by definition an abandonment of the old. The New Negro was a kaleidoscopic figure, but certain

¹⁶⁰ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 45.

characteristics appeared in all formulations. The language of the New Negro was highly gendered, expressive of the masculinist aspirations of much black political activism in the period. Black women – especially activists and writers – were most certainly part of the New Negro movement, but the figure was universally articulated as male. Especially following the war, the driving idea was that black men had once again earned for the race, through their service, the respect of their fellow-citizens and the right to full participation. The New Negro expressed this expectation and its corollary demands. Primary among these was an unequivocal refusal to accept the status quo of black subordination, and the profound determination to act rather than wait for change.¹⁶¹ Claude McKay’s poem “If We Must Die” (from which the title of this dissertation is taken) was a kind of anthem:

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.
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!

Oh, kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death blow!
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!

With the willingness to fight in the face of terror, lethal danger, and desperately unfair odds, the New Negro claims manhood – and humanity – for himself and his kinsmen, his

¹⁶¹ On the New Negro: Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* as well as vol. 2 of *Du Bois*; Palmer, *Passageways*, vol. II, 141-144; Tuttle, ch 7; Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Politics and Culture in the United States Since the Turn of the Century* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Haywood, 123.

kind. McKay defines the attackers as monstrous, inhuman cowards, who hold unmerited power through their greater numbers and who may very well prevail in their murderous efforts. The New Negro who defies this “mad and hungry pack” goes to his grave victorious however, because he has faced his enemy unflinching. The poem foregrounds the inequities African Americans faced, grouping – and perhaps conflating – them with white violence. McKay calls on his audience to act against the violence regardless of the danger, to claim humanity at any cost. He declares the impatience and the certitude that were central to New Negro politics and culture, in all its manifestations.

African Americans by and large experienced the First World War as the acceleration of a process which was already underway. A process of transition from rural to urban, from agriculture to industry, from Washington to Du Bois, from supplication to demand, had been ongoing since the Civil War. As the new century was born this transformation had grown increasingly more apparent, but wartime circumstances and events both highlighted and intensified it.

On the Negroes [the] double experience of deliberate and devilish persecution from their own countrymen, coupled with a taste of real democracy and world-old culture, was revolutionizing. They began to hate prejudice and discrimination as they had never hated it before. They began to realize its eternal meaning and complications...they were filled with a bitter, dogged determination never to give up the fight for Negro equality in America...A new, radical Negro spirit has been born in France, which leaves us older radicals far behind. Thousands of young Black men have offered their lives for the Lilies of France and they return ready to offer them again for the Sunflowers of Afro-America.¹⁶²

¹⁶² Du Bois, “Great War,” in Lewis, *Du Bois Reader*, 711.

With the end of the war, the idea of a New Negro moved to the forefront of African American politics and culture, spurred by the experience of the war at home and abroad. This figure, and the movement he represented, would be a major force in the “American century,” and especially in the American city.

CHAPTER TWO

“First-born child of the Union”¹: Washington, D.C. as the Capital of Black America

[D]uring the last session of congress (1815-1816) as several members were standing in the street, near the new capitol, a drove of manacled coloured people were passing by; and when just opposite, one of them elevating his manacles as high as he could reach, commenced singing the favorite national song, “Hail Columbia! Happy land,”....

-- Letter from Congressman Adgate to Jesse Torrey²

Washington, D.C. came into being like no other city in the U.S. The site for the national capital was chosen by the first president, and in its planning and construction the city was meant to express the republican ideals on which the country was founded. Its creators were the founders of the nation, and they envisioned the city as emblematic, as both representative and unique, the highest expression of what was great about the newborn republic. Washington is in multiple ways “an extraordinary rather than a typical city,” a national metropolis, pulling people and ideas from a countrywide rather than a regional or local net and in turn reflecting its own particular influence back across the nation. And yet, its very singularity makes the capital emblematic of the nation, of its defining characteristics. The historical forces that shaped the United States have been most visible and instrumental in its capital city. Not least among these factors has been the continuous problem of race.

¹ Mary Ames, *Ten Years in Washington: Life and Scenes in the National Capital, As a Woman Sees Them*, 70-71. Quoted in Carl Abbott, *Political Terrain: Washington, D.C., from Tidewater Town to Global Metropolis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 67.

² In Smithsonian Anacostia Museum and Center for African American History and Culture, *The Black Washingtonians: The Anacostia Museum Illustrated Chronology* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2005), 21. In subsequent references this book will be cited as “Anacostia.”

The Federal City is, and has ever been, “freighted with symbolic meanings.”

Though these meanings were always contested, and have changed over time, the capital has held on to its figurative weight for Americans across a wide spectrum. In a variety of ways, including sometimes as a negative example, the city was – and is – singular in its “special symbolic and functional roles.” Everything in the capital is – and has always been – political, we are told, and reflective of national political circumstances. At the same time, race is – and has always been – at the core of life and action there.³

From the earliest point in its history, Washington, D.C. was a political flashpoint. The battle within the early republic over where to site the national capital had a great deal to do with the question of slavery and the already vital tension between northern and southern interests. The decision to locate the capital in the boundary area between north and south was a compromise between regional interests, but one in which the south had prevailed. The divergent concerns which would lead to so much strife were already in play during the Constitutional Convention and certainly in the second session of Congress, during which the location of the capital was finally agreed upon. After seven or eight years of wrangling, negotiating, and temporary solutions, more than one threat by southern states to secede, and two northern revocations of earlier agreements, the Congress of the United States decided to locate the national capital in the Potomac region rather than in Pennsylvania.⁴

³ Carl Abbott points out that an additional aspect of this choice, beyond the north/south compromise, lay in the idea of the “West.” The successful vision in 1790 placed Virginia at the “heart of the American heartland,” and looked west with an avid expansionist eye. Abbott, 5, 7-8; David Levering Lewis, *The District of Columbia: A Bicentennial History* (New York: Norton, 1976), 76.

⁴ Randall Bond Truett, ed., *Washington, D.C.: A Guide to the Nation’s Capital, Originally Compiled by the Federal Writers’ Program of the Work Projects Administration* (New York: Hastings House, 1968 ed.), 25-26 (hereinafter cited as “WPA”); Abbott, 30.

George Washington himself chose the actual site on land he knew very well not far from his own property at Mount Vernon. Its location on the Potomac was intended to make the capital a “gateway to the new nation and its new empire.” But as it happened, despite its setting on an increasingly important waterway, the city never achieved commercial or industrial eminence. Eclipsed – even preempted – by nearby Baltimore in trade and manufacturing, the District was always restricted to a singular focus. Politics, the city’s lifeblood and *raison d’être*, would also keep it from becoming an industrial center: plans for roads and canals which would have made it truly central were scuttled by political rivalries and plays, and by the lack of local money. Despite the hopes of its builders and boosters, Washington, D.C. “remained local rather than national in its economy,” with a singular focus and source of identity: politics.⁵

Slave City

The Chesapeake was slave country, and the nation’s new capital was a slaveholding city. As David Levering Lewis notes, “The auction block, the lash, and the manacled gangs on their way to the Deep South were as much a part of Washington as the steamy climate, the marshes, and the dust.”⁶ At the same time, from the very beginning the capital offered an unusual amount of opportunity for African Americans. Lewis points to the role of the black mathematician and astronomer Benjamin Banneker in Pierre L’Enfant’s early survey of the site to emphasize the fundamental role – symbolic and actual – of African Americans in the capital from its earliest days. Lewis asserts that Banneker’s

intrinsic significance to the Federal City [lay in] the
symbolism of his presence: he was the gifted black man in

⁵ Abbott, 27-28, 35-38; WPA, 26-27.

⁶ Lewis, *D.C.*, 44.

attendance at the creation of a city whose past, present, and future is as much the cynosure of black as it is of white destiny in America.⁷

The tobacco country surrounding the site of the Federal City was worked by enslaved people, and in 1776 blacks were a third of the population of Georgetown, just across Rock Creek.⁸ Enslaved as well as free blacks built Washington side by side with white craftsmen from Baltimore and other cities. The census of 1800 showed 783 free African Americans, 3,244 slaves, and 10,266 whites in the District of Columbia; by the next census the number of free blacks in the District had more than tripled, to 2549. Neither of the other two groups had nearly as high a rate of increase, though their numbers had also grown substantially.⁹ Like slaves in other cities, many in Washington were hired out – or hired themselves out on their own time if they had it – instead of working directly for their owners. This practice generally allowed slaves in cities considerably more autonomy than was possible for those living on plantations and small farms. In many cases it also allowed them to earn enough beyond what their owners collected so that they might buy their own or their loved ones' freedom, if their owners were willing.

As Lewis notes above, the market in slaves was a fixture in the city by 1812. D.C. was in fact a hub of the slave trade between the Upper and Lower South. After the U.S. outlawed participation in the international slave trade in 1808, the capital's slave market grew in importance. Slaves would be held in the city's private (and later federal) jails, located near the Capitol, while traders negotiated in private taverns. There was not one

⁷ Ibid., 42.

⁸ Lesko et al, *Black Georgetown Remembered* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 2.

⁹ The number of whites was 16,088, slaves 5,505. U.S. Census records, cited in Green, *Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 33.

central slave market, as in other cities, due to a 1796 law against slave importation for sale. Slaves were however sometimes sold at illegal auctions – probably held within slave pens, some of which were attached to the homes of prominent traders – as well as in individual deals.¹⁰

As early as the second decade of the nineteenth century, Congressman John Randolph of Virginia called for the end of the slave trade in the nation's capital.

You call this the land of liberty, and every day that passes things are done in it at which the despotisms of Europe would be horror-struck and disgusted...In no part of the earth – not even excepting the rivers of the coast of Africa – was there so great, so infamous a slave market as in the metropolis, in the seat of government of this nation which prides itself on freedom.¹¹

Randolph, though himself a slaveholder, was not alone in finding it unseemly in the seat of liberty to have gangs of enslaved people being trooped through the streets, sold at auction, or housed in the city jail while awaiting transport. It was particularly uncomfortable to be presented with such a sight when in the company of foreign diplomats or visitors. Despite the protests though, the slave trade persisted in the city until the Compromise of 1850 outlawed it. Because the capital was not really a commercial center, the slave trade probably had greater importance to the city's economy than it would have in cities where there was more generalized commerce as well, which may have been one of the reasons for its persistence in the face of so much disapproval.

Even as a slave city however, Washington was home to many free blacks. Laws in surrounding areas forbade manumitted slaves (or any free blacks) to reside, especially with the tightening of black codes after Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831. Consequently,

¹⁰ Ibid., 20, 29; Anacostia 16, 41.

¹¹ Cong. John Randolph, quoted in Lewis, *D.C.*, 47-48.

many freedpeople made their way to the District between 1820 and 1850. They saw it either as a destination which would keep them close to still-enslaved family and community or as a reasonably hospitable stopping point on their journey further north – or both. This was true despite the fact that it could be dangerous for free blacks in the capital, as they could be abducted and sold as slaves, falsely claimed as escapees, or even sold into servitude as payment for jail fees or other debts.¹² Nevertheless, the city’s free blacks were a visible and active presence. They helped build the city, they helped defend it against the British in 1814, and they were active in the postwar rebuilding of the major structures the British had burned to the ground. Furthermore, both enslaved and free African Americans comprised most of the city’s service economy, from the most menial positions to the most elevated, as caterers, restaurateurs, and hoteliers. Black women were prominent among the city’s vendors, selling vegetables from their own gardens, cooking and serving meals on their own time, hoarding their profits, and in more than one instance using their savings to purchase their own and their families’ freedom.¹³

Black Washingtonians began their major institution-building early in the nineteenth century. The first school for black children in D.C. was established in 1807 by three former slaves who worked at the Navy Yard, and within a few years several other schools had opened.¹⁴ Some of these schools were founded by whites like Henry Potter, an Englishman who started his school in 1809.¹⁵ The capital came to be a mecca of educational opportunity for black children, well before its first black public schools were

¹² Lewis, *D.C.*, 47; Green, *Secret City*, 18-19. This was, of course, true for free blacks in other cities as well, including northern ones like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. See, for instance, Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹³ Constance Green, *Washington: Capital City*, v. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 77; Anacostia, 12-15.

¹⁴ Sandra Fitzpatrick and Maria Goodwin, *The Guide to Black Washington: Places and Events of Historical and Cultural Significance in the Nation’s Capital* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1999), 57.

¹⁵ Anacostia, 16.

established during the Civil War. One of the most important black schools in the city's history, Miner Normal School (later Miner Teachers College), was founded in 1851 by a white woman. It provided most of the city's black elementary school teachers between Reconstruction and the Second World War.¹⁶ The fact that it created and sustained so many educators and educated people made Washington a source of pride for African Americans, in and out of the city, for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From Reconstruction on, the black educational system was also a major resource for employment, patronage, and political clout in black Washington, and it was the site of more than one major battle over dominance within the city's black power structure over the decades.

In 1816, black parishioners left the Montgomery Street Methodist Church in Georgetown in order to form their own congregation. The oldest black congregation in the District of Columbia, it would in 1840 become Mount Zion Methodist Episcopal Church.¹⁷ Though it meant greater financial pressure, and though some denominations required that black congregations be supervised by white ministers, growing numbers of African American church members in the District rejected segregated pews, stairways, and baptisms and built their own institutions. The first independent black congregation in Washington, Israel Bethel, was founded in 1820.¹⁸ Over the years, ministers and church leaders were at the forefront of any political or social efforts that black Washingtonians undertook as a group, as was generally true elsewhere. In addition, church-based organizations and activities provided African American women an important field for

¹⁶ Fitzpatrick and Goodwin, *Guide to Black Washington*, 105-06.

¹⁷ Georgetown was not incorporated into the District until 1871, however. Until that time it was a black enclave; once it became part of the District, African Americans began to be pushed out.

¹⁸ Lesko, et al, *Black Georgetown*, 6-7; Green, *Secret City*, 17, 24-25.

political and social expression and engagement, as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has shown. In Washington, D.C. this was certainly the case. Especially after Emancipation, the city encompassed a large number of black women's clubs and organizations, as well as headquarters of some national associations, and many of these were church-based.

From early on, black Washingtonians fought race-based legal restrictions when and as they could. With each successive burst of black in-migration came a surge of white hostility, often with attendant increase in restrictions on blacks. In 1821 a new city ordinance required free people of color to show the mayor their "free papers" as well as evidence that three white residents vouched for the "good character" of each family. They were also to buy a twenty-dollar "peace bond" and to have a "respected white man" willing to insure their good behavior. William Costin, a messenger for the Bank of Washington and one of the city's most highly respected black men, challenged the legality of the ordinance, based on the argument that "the Constitution knows no distinction of color. That all who are not slaves are equally free; that they are ...equally citizens of the United States." Though a judge on the Circuit Court found that Costin, as well as other longtime black residents, should be excepted from this ordinance because their residence predated the institution of the law, he also ruled that dominant legal thinking at the time legitimated the ordinance. This defeat was presumably tempered at least somewhat (for those black Washingtonians who were aware of it) by Costin's managing to get his day in court in a context where black men could not testify against whites, and by the political assertiveness and courage – the outright daring, really, in 1821 – of his constitutional argument.¹⁹

¹⁹ Green, *Secret City*, 25-27; Lewis, *D.C.*, 46-47.

Legally, the antebellum years were up and down, but mostly constricted for blacks in the capital. They continued to build and reinforce their institutions – churches and schools, certainly, but also mutual benefit, fraternal, literary, and social clubs and other kinds of associations. In 1818 a group of men organized the Resolute Beneficial Society, for instance, which provided health and burial benefits as well as a free school for black children not just for members but also for indigent African Americans.²⁰ The number of such organizations would grow through the century, amongst the city's black elites as well as its middling and working classes. By late in the century one observer claimed that there were over a thousand such organizations.²¹ The elite joined, among many others, the Lotus Club, the Bethel Literary and Historical Association, the Monday Night Literary Society, the Treble Clef Club. By the latter part of the century, the middle and working classes had developed a parallel world of societies which included the Chaldeans, the Knights of Moses, the Osceolas, the Galilean Fishermen, the Sons and Daughters of Samaris, the Solid Yantics, the Lively Eights, and the Celestial Golden Links.²²

Through the antebellum period, despite legal and social constrictions, black men were able to gain ground in the professions, in commerce, and even government employment, as well as in the more customary service and laboring realms. Black women too, though most commonly employed in domestic service, had growing educational opportunities in the capital, which led to work as schoolteachers and for some to commercial prosperity. In the later part of the century they would find government work

²⁰ Anacostia, 23-24.

²¹ *Sentinel*, 12/22/1883. Quoted in Green, *Secret City*, 141.

²² *Ibid.*, 149-50.

as clerks and messengers, but opportunities in government service for African Americans were not very common until after the Civil War.

The Physical City

Pierre L'Enfant's plans for the city reflected the founders' grand ambitions of republican eminence and international propriety. In designing a city of grand boulevards and monumental public buildings, L'Enfant was prescient. Unlike the city's early landowners and boosters, the engineer believed that "the Capital City's nourishment, unlike that of other cities, would come out of its public buildings rather than out of its trade centers." Others disagreed, and planned for a more commercially-driven city. L'Enfant was ultimately vindicated, as the city never became a hub of trade or any industry other than the government.²³

Its builders intended the capital to be on a par with urban hubs like Philadelphia and London – "centers of Atlantic commerce." The city's nineteenth-century residences were designed according to the contemporary model of "terraces and rows of red brick town houses," the dwellings of choice for the middle classes in commercial cities. Individual owners as well as speculative builders chose this style, the latter often erecting rows of several homes behind a shared front, like those being built at the same time in other cities. What was unique to D.C. though, was what lay behind the brick facades – "an architectural tradition adapted from the southern plantation." Slaveowners who had residences in the capital in those early years built outbuildings on their back lots to house slaves and their workspaces. "Unifying the complex were brick walls or board fences that

²³ WPA, 27-29; Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 37-38.

created miniature urban plantations.” At the same time, less prosperous homeowners resided in “small frame houses that copied the dwellings of small Chesapeake farmers.”²⁴

So from its inception the city’s physical character reflected local as well as international influences in a blending of styles. Its aspirations toward cosmopolitanism, toward imperial centrality and international stature, were tempered by the provincial realities of the immediate environment. The ambition to measure up to the world’s great capitals which was so apparent in the city’s plan and in its monumental government structures echoed in the residential construction devised for the city’s prosperous and comfortable classes, and in the early days also in the fact that the “lower orders” – both black and white – were often relegated to the periphery of residential areas, or hidden behind the outer walls and facades of their social betters. At the same time the latter arrangements reflected the Tidewater lifestyle in which so many of the city’s residents were rooted. This juxtaposition was probably a major factor in the derision with which many nineteenth-century visitors to the capital – in particular those who came from “truly” cosmopolitan cities – viewed it. Of course, the fact that the city was under construction for most of that century was certainly a part of the problem too. Charles Dickens commented in the 1840s:

Spacious avenues that begin in nothing and lead nowhere; streets, mile long, that only want houses, roads, and inhabitants; public buildings that need but a public to be complete; and ornaments of great thoroughfares, which only lack great thoroughfares to ornament—are its leading features....It is sometimes called the City of Magnificent Distances, but it might be termed with greater propriety the City of Magnificent Intentions.²⁵

²⁴ Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 48.

²⁵ Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (New York: George Munro, 1885), quoted in Lewis, *D.C.*, 16.

Dickens was one of the city's admirers. Anthony Trollope called it "as melancholy and miserable a town as the mind of man can conceive" and even as late as 1869 Horace Greeley was urging that the capital be moved to St. Louis.²⁶

Over the course of the nineteenth century, as the city's population increased, and especially after the Civil War, growing numbers of its poorer inhabitants lived in alley dwellings originally constructed to hold servants, slaves, and sometimes workmen frequently employed by their landlords. After 1850, and especially in the 1880s and '90s, more and more of the new building in Washington included cheaply constructed alley houses. Also in this period the blocks began to be arranged with interior, or "blind" alleys, which could only be reached by other alleys. This development hid the alleys almost completely, thus shielding others from their squalor even as it intensified the isolation of their residents. Though deplored by police as well as reformers, it was the customary practice in late nineteenth century construction.²⁷

After 1865 blocks were subdivided into both street- and alley-facing lots, so the alley dwellings did not have to be squeezed onto the "real" lot. In the '80s and '90s there was a speculative building boom in D.C. as in other U.S. cities; developers built on streets and alleys at the same time in an effort to maximize occupancy and therefore income. Residential building clusters arose in proximity to specific workplaces; people still needed to be able to walk to work. By this time few of those who owned alley residences lived near or had anything much more to do with them beyond collecting rent, in some cases from a lessee who in turn had sublet the house and was also profiting from the arrangement. Housing was extremely tight in the city and landlords were not yet

²⁶ Trollope, *North America* (New York: Knopf, 1951), in Lewis, *D.C.*, 15; 19.

²⁷ Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington*, 18

bound by law or regulation to maintain their properties according to standards of safety or sanitation. As a result, the alley homes – usually built cheaply in the first place – were decrepit and hazardous. Due to the high rents, they were also overcrowded, as doubling and tripling up was the only way most residents could afford them, especially in the latter two decades of the century, as demand for housing in the city intensified.²⁸

Until the 1850s most alley residents were white laborers. During the Civil War some alley buildings were used as barracks for wounded soldiers, while there is evidence that others were reserved and even sometimes built expressly for former slaves. In the war years Washington took in a continuous influx of escaped slaves, and after the war the in-migration of freedpeople intensified. As their numbers in the city grew, black residents' percentage of the alley population increased as well, so that by 1880 they were an overwhelming majority – 93 percent. In the same period they made up one third of the city's entire population.²⁹

Not all black Washingtonians were alley dwellers, however. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, most black residents lived at the periphery of residential sections. This was a common pattern; in New York City, for instance, black residents of the periphery were slowly pushed north as the city expanded. In D.C. however, because of alley construction, many of the poorest African Americans were swallowed into the interior of the city's blocks, though others were certainly pushed to the edges and to the undesirable low-lying areas.

African Americans made up a larger percentage of D.C.'s population than in other major cities, and there was a great deal more class diversity among the District's blacks

²⁸ Ibid., 15-38.

²⁹ Borchert, *Alley Life*, 26-27; 12.

than elsewhere, which made class a larger factor in black housing patterns. It was poor blacks in D.C. who were marginalized, either literally or internally within the alleys. In a research project on segregation in the capital, E. Franklin Frazier reported that “upper class Negroes enjoyed relative freedom to live almost anywhere in the city.”³⁰

From the Civil War until about the turn of the century, there was a solid, “tight-knit” black community “centered largely in Capitol Hill, [the city’s] downtown neighborhoods, and ...[in the] southwest.”³¹ By 1900 this pattern was disrupted, as the city grew and blacks were pushed out of the center. The real estate boom in the northwest section absorbed a certain number of them, and a black commercial center grew up in that area. Upper and middle class blacks were more integrated with whites, though they tended to live in clusters of two or more neighboring houses, especially as the city’s population increased. Often it was a case of the city growing up around them, and because they owned their homes they could not be pushed out the way renters were. They could in some instances buy homes in new areas – the practice of restrictive covenants did not become common until much later. But Borchert and Green both cite instances of probable “conspiring” among whites to keep blacks out of certain areas as early as the 1880s, and certainly as jim crow gained momentum around the turn of the century, many whites would have objected to blacks moving in, no matter their class status.³² By the same token, it is likely that blacks – especially members of the elite, whose gentility made such conflict excessively distasteful – would have been uninclined to move in among neighbors whom they could expect to be hostile. For some members of the black

³⁰ E. Franklin Frazier, “Research Projects/Negro Youth Study/National Committee on Segregation in the Nation’s Capital – Report,” Frazier papers, box 131-107, folder 1, MSRC.

³¹ Anacostia, 74.

³² Borchert, *Alley Life*, 7.

elite, especially in the nineteenth century, there is evidence that their class identification was at least as significant as race if not more so, and so they might have sought more color-blind living situations. But this is a troublesome question because again, they would not have been likely to choose to live among hostile whites of any class, and they could not reliably expect even ruling class whites to share their own prioritization of class over race in all cases.³³

Civil War City

Washington was at the center of the Civil War, literally and symbolically. Situated in the borderland between North and South, and as the command post of the Union, it was a “strategic pivot,” around which the war “swirled ... as if it was the eye of a great storm system.” Soldiers waiting to fight, and those wounded in battle were quartered there. The fighting was frequently so nearby that citizens would drive out to watch the fighting. Washingtonians were divided in their loyalties; not all who sympathized with the rebellion left at the start of the war, though most of those with means fled south early on. As the home of the president whose election had provided the spark for the war, and who declared an end to slavery in the middle of it, the city represented – to people on both sides, and to the slaves whose legal status was at issue – the headquarters not just of the Union but of the antislavery movement whose goals the Union had been backed into promoting. Freed and escaped slaves made their way to the capital from the south, while entrepreneurs, “contractors and inventors, officials and office seekers, petitioners and poets, foreign journalists and American railroad promoters” poured in from the north.³⁴ The city was booming during the war, financially

³³ Moore, *Leading the Race*, passim; Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, passim; Lewis, *Harlem*, 147-48.

³⁴ Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 68-69.

and demographically: its population jumped from 75,000 to 132,000 in those years. Some 40,000 of those people were black, though many of them were passing through the city.³⁵ When he abolished slavery in the District in 1862, President Lincoln authorized the enlistment of blacks for the army, thus allowing several thousand to join the ranks of soldiers preparing to fight, though in separate regiments. After the Emancipation Proclamation, enlistment accelerated. Walt Whitman described one black regiment in 1863 as “very good...they go around, have the regular uniform – they submit to no nonsense. Others are constantly forming.”³⁶ By the end of the war, 180,000 black men – a fifth of adult males under 45 – had served in the Union Army.³⁷

Most of the black Civil War arrivals to the capital had been agricultural laborers, and they had little preparation (other than perhaps emotional) for the kinds of employment – indeed, for the reality of wage labor – as well as the social and physical realities of the urban environment they found in Washington. For some the capital was a stopping point, as it had always been for former slaves, on a longer journey north. But for many of the freedpeople, the capital, where slavery was abolished in May of 1862, was their destination. They received some aid from the Freedmen’s Relief Association, the precursor to the Freedmen’s Bureau, but their situation was generally dire. As their numbers increased in the city, so did white hostility. Blacks were attacked on the streets by white “hoodlums”; the streetcar company wouldn’t allow them to ride inside the cars until forced to by Congress in 1863; and for housing they were at first relegated mostly to shacks near the forts on the perimeter of the city, and an alley behind the Capitol As time

³⁵ The total increase in black inhabitants from 1860 to 1870 was between 20,000 and 25,000.

³⁶ Walt Whitman, *The Wound Dresser, A Series of Letters written from Hospitals in Washington during the Rebellion* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1898), 92. Quoted in Lewis, *D.C.*, 57.

³⁷ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 8.

went by, barracks and alley dwellings were commandeered or built to house them in various parts of the city such as Foggy Bottom and what is now Logan Circle in the northwest of the city. Ten thousand found themselves living in the depths of “Murder Bay,” not far from the White House, where, according to the police superintendent,

crime, filth and poverty seem to vie with each other in a career of degradation and death. Whole families...are crowded into mere apologies for shanties....During storms of rain or snow their roofs afford but slight protection, while from beneath a few rough boards used for floors, the miasmatic effluvia from the most disgustingly filthy and stagnant water...renders the atmosphere within these hovels stifling and sickening in the extreme.³⁸

Hundreds and by some reports thousands died in the city during the war from various causes related to poverty and overcrowding.³⁹

The Freedmen’s Bureau, established in 1863 (though not officially ratified by an act of Congress until 1865), was instrumental in aiding many of the new arrivals, providing housing and setting up schools and the precursor to Freedmen’s Hospital. In its short tenure, the Bureau, which was active throughout the former slave states, made a substantial mark on the capital. One of many Bureau projects was Barry’s Farm, a “self-help community” built on land bought for the freedpeople and divided into one-acre lots on which the new owners built small houses with lumber allotted them by the bureau; they developed their property at night after working all day in the city.⁴⁰

The Reconstruction years were particularly optimistic for black Washingtonians, not only because of the inspiring presence of newly elected black legislators, many of them former Civil War soldiers, nor simply because their own rapidly growing numbers

³⁸ Green, *Secret City*, 66; 82.

³⁹ Lewis, *D.C.*, 59.

⁴⁰ Fitzpatrick and Goodwin, *Guide to Black Washington*, 49-50, 193-195.

gave them increased political clout in the city, where they – the men, that is – gained the vote in 1867 (when they numbered 8200 registrants, as compared to 9800 whites).⁴¹ After President Lincoln’s assassination, radical Republicans in Congress had made it their business to promote the “speedy advancement of local blacks...[as] the touchstone for a program of national Reconstruction.”⁴² Blacks responded enthusiastically to their new political status, immediately unleashing a “torrent of political activity.”⁴³ Black men took up elected positions on the City Council and the city’s House of Delegates, and were appointed by President Grant to the Governor’s Council.⁴⁴

As the city thrived, so did its black population. For a few years whatever hostility certain whites may have felt toward the expanding black population was out of fashion, and beyond that apparently tempered by the general busyness and well-being dominating the scene. A black man owned Wormley’s, the city’s most exclusive hotel, and elite blacks and whites frequently mixed socially. Frederick Douglass was one of the city’s most notable citizens, black or white; he and the hotelier James Wormley were pallbearers when the vice president died. Black men could also seek employment in government offices, where a number of clerkships were available to them. Certain federal appointments were reserved as well, and restrictions on the presence of black citizens in public places were lifted, by law if not white businessmen’s inclination. “There were a few merchants so out of tune with the times as to refuse black patronage; they were made to feel the teeth of the city’s civil rights ordinances.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ Lewis calls the years 1868-73 “The Golden Age of black Washington” (66).

⁴² Lewis, *D.C.*, 63.

⁴³ Lesko, *Black Georgetown*, 20.

⁴⁴ Anacostia, 72.

⁴⁵ Lewis, *D.C.*, 66.

Freedmen's Hospital, which started in 1862 "as a collection of tents and barracks in an open field," grew into a major facility in these years. With funding from the Freedmen's Bureau for its facilities and an integrated staff presided over by a black superintendent, the hospital served Washington's black population for decades. Its director performed the first successful heart surgery there in 1893, and years later Dr. Charles Drew did some of his pioneering work in blood storage while affiliated. From the mid-1890s the hospital included a nursing school, adding to the city's institutional and educational allure for African Americans in search of professional education and employment.⁴⁶

The city's black schools, though separate and unequal, were nevertheless superior in both numbers and quality to those elsewhere in this period. As we have seen, schools were a priority for black Washingtonians almost as soon as the city was established, and there were at least ten black private academies around the city at the time of the Civil War. An 1862 law required the establishment of black public schools, and in 1864 Congress decreed that those schools must be funded proportionately to black tax revenue. Not until 1866, however, were the trustees of the system able to access the funds, due to the recalcitrance of city officials. That year, Congress appropriated \$10,000 for the construction of black schools, designated properties for the purpose, and empowered the trustees to sue the District for the property tax appropriation if necessary. An effort to integrate black and white schools because of the disparate funding in this period failed, but the city's first black public high school was started in 1870, almost ten years before

⁴⁶ Fitzpatrick and Goodwin, *Guide*, 108.

there was a white one.⁴⁷ Washington's educational system was thus an additional draw for families who wanted their children to get the best possible schooling; the city also attracted and retained those who sought work as teachers at every level.

With the founding of Howard University in 1869, blacks in Washington gained access to a "normal" rather than technical or vocational college education. Howard's eventual status (by the end of the nineteenth century) as the "national Negro university" made appointment to its faculty one of the most prestigious jobs available to black intellectuals, and the university contributed a substantial amount to the city's gravitational pull for black intellectuals and artists. In addition to the university, black scholarly organizations (such as the American Negro Academy and the Association for the study of Negro Life and History) were headquartered in D.C., along with comparable white institutions.⁴⁸

Educated young black women found Washington congenial, as it offered not just reliable, respectable non-menial employment but social possibilities. Teaching in a city with a large, fairly well organized school system and a vibrant social and cultural life would have been heavenly for many, given the available alternatives. Most black schools around the rural and small town south were small and underfunded, with students whose educational needs would frequently have had to take second place to helping in the fields (especially once Reconstruction ended and black sharecroppers found themselves in dire economic straits). A teacher in such a school was often single-handedly dealing with students at all levels, with minimal facilities or materials and little support beyond what illiterate and overburdened parents – who valued but could not always prioritize

⁴⁷ Lewis, *D.C.*, 60-61. For a detailed discussion of the problems with funding, see Green, *Secret City*, 67-70.

⁴⁸ Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 75.

education in the face of crippling economic circumstances – might offer. In most southern cities, black schools, though prized by their constituencies, were financially embattled, especially once the energy of Reconstruction had been thwarted. In contrast, at the turn of the century, even after the toppling of many Reconstruction gains in the city and with the growing depredations of jim crowism, Washington was still a land of opportunity of every kind for young African Americans. Black Washingtonians as a group had the wherewithal and the will to support the schools with which they identified so strongly, and they did so consistently.

The influx of black people during and after the Civil War had other consequences for the city. One of the most significant and long lasting came through the fight over governance. In June of 1874, after an investigation into widespread corruption in the city government, Congress suspended the District’s territorial government, replacing it with a temporary three-man board of commissioners appointed by the president. Though the corruption was real, there was an additional motive: the city’s growing black electorate. Their own disenfranchisement was preferable for many whites to the prospect of growing numbers of African American elected officials and the burgeoning black political power they represented. And at the same time, big taxpayers preferred a “regime free of pressure from non-propertied ‘riff-raff.’”⁴⁹

The Organic Act of 1878 codified the 1874 federalization of the city government, and “ended the brief hope of building a black urban community around a comprehensive alliance of local business and local government.”⁵⁰ A few exceptionally distinguished black men retained the “honorific” offices which had been reserved for them: recorder of

⁴⁹ Green, *Secret City*, 5; Lewis, *D.C.*, 70; Anacostia, viii, 111.

⁵⁰ Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 74.

deeds, auditor of the treasury, marshal of the district, paymaster general, and ambassadors to Haiti and Liberia. There were still jobs in government available to African Americans, and not all of them were simply menial, though the Reconstruction-era expectation that their numbers in such offices would continue to grow over time were disappointed.⁵¹ The black elite turned inward at this point according to some scholars, focusing on institutions, gathering their forces, and attempting to avoid negative white attention while seeking “an independent basis for survival.”⁵²

After Reconstruction: The Secret City

As white racial hostility and violence intensified and white leaders failed to challenge it, a retreat from open confrontation did make sense to many African Americans in leadership positions. This was the era dominated by Booker T. Washington, who gave his famous Atlanta Compromise speech in 1895, urging black citizens to remain in the south, to accept their current status and work quietly to earn the respect and trust of white Americans.

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing.⁵³

Of course, there were those who disagreed with Washington’s approach, among them Calvin Chase of the *Washington Bee*, who declared that Washington “had said something that was death to the Afro-American and elevating to the white people.”⁵⁴ African Americans disagreed with each other on this, as on other social and political questions.

⁵¹ Lewis, *D.C.*, 70, 72; Green, *Secret City*, 111-113.

⁵² Jacqueline Moore, *Leading the Race*, 191-92.

⁵³ Quoted in Palmer, *Passageways*, v. 2, 50.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*; Moore, 199.

W.E.B. Du Bois himself endorsed the Atlanta Compromise speech in 1895, probably because Washington also called on white southerners to allow blacks to make “gradual progress in agriculture and business and to rein in the rednecks,” as David Lewis explains it.⁵⁵ In any case, disagreements among black leaders as to when, where, and how to confront injustice would remain strong, arguments over strategies and necessities likewise. Speaking specifically about conditions in the capital, Andrew Hilyer declared in 1893 that such disagreements should be discreet:

There are some phases of this race question which it is not well to discuss in public, in our Lyceums, and in the press. They are strictly family matters and should be discussed and settled among ourselves when no unfriendly ears are listening.⁵⁶

In 1892 Hilyer had founded the Union League, “to promote economic cooperation among the city’s black citizens and to help eradicate adverse conditions and obstacles confronting blacks in business.” The League published a directory of businesses that hired black employees, so that black Washingtonians could support them. He was clearly promoting a particular form of racial action which was not exactly contrary to Washington’s teachings, but which was intended to foster and expand black economic security and clout in the city.⁵⁷

The capital city was home to an unmatched number of African American “‘old families,’ ...whose emphasis on family background, good breeding, respectability, and color bound them into an exclusive, self-consciously elitist group.”⁵⁸ After Reconstruction, as the climate throughout the country grew more hostile to blacks

⁵⁵ Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*, 175.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Moore, *Leading the Race*, 193.

⁵⁷ Fitzpatrick and Goodwin, *Guide*, 106.

⁵⁸ Gatewood, *Aristocrats*, 39.

regardless of wealth or breeding, the number of those “who considered themselves to be among the ‘upper tens’ and who in many cases were several generations removed from slavery,” in the city increased. They moved to Washington in search of a more congenial environment. Similar to other black migrants, they were drawn to the city’s unique prospects, seeking its

educational and cultural opportunities, the availability of white-collar jobs commensurate with their education and aspirations, and the presence of a black social group that shared their values, tastes, and self-perceptions.⁵⁹

Moore claims that in the early post-Reconstruction years, many black elites aspired to acceptance by whites, seeing class-based similarities as more important than racial difference. Unfortunately for them, the objects of their aspiration did not agree. Moore’s view is that African American aristocrats in D.C. began working in earnest for racial equality rather than simply their own personal advantages, after it became clear to them that whites would never accept them, no matter how rich, cultured, or otherwise deserving they may have been.⁶⁰ On the other hand, Willard Gatewood argues that black elites had always been concerned with racial equality; it was simply that they saw themselves in the “vanguard” of the race. For these aristocrats, “nothing was more absurd than the idea that all blacks were social equals.” In their eyes, such an idea arose from white ignorance, and was “positively detrimental to racial progress.” For whites to assume that all blacks were the same, and to judge the entire race according to the actions of its “worst elements,” was absurd.

Because colored aristocrats viewed themselves as proof that all blacks were not alike, either in culture,

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Moore, *Leading the Race*, Chapter 1, passim. See also, Glenda Gilmore on “Best Men and Women” in *Gender and Jim Crow*.

sophistication, wealth, or even color, they chafed under a system that placed all Negroes on an equal plane....⁶¹

A sense of *noblesse oblige*, and a corollary belief that they knew best how to solve the “race problem,” was common among black elites – as, indeed, among privileged whites. Many black aristocrats believed that the first step ought to be their own ascension to civil equality with whites, so they might “inspire ‘the fellows of the lower grade,’” as Gatewood puts it.

In the early twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois exhorted those whom he called the “Talented Tenth” to bring the race forward, to lead both by example and by creating opportunities for all African Americans through their own righteous action in fighting for political and economic rights. “The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.”⁶² Black women involved in church- or club-based uplift projects used the motto “lifting while we climb,” while activists and educators like Mary Church Terrell, Angelina Grimke and many others saw racial uplift work as both their obligation and their due.⁶³ This should not be surprising; as a rule elites are frequently if not always elitist. The idea of *noblesse oblige* is an ancient one and appears in a variety of cultures. Moore notes too that “when discrimination was at its harshest, racial pride was a citadel in which the race’s leaders could defend themselves,” and such pride was both motivation and goal in uplift work.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Willard Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 45-46.

⁶² Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*, 288.

⁶³ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Glenda E. Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*; Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*; Mark Schneider, “We Return Fighting”; Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*; Lori Ginzburg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence*.

⁶⁴ Moore, *Leading the Race*, 191.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, middle class and elite reformers across racial and regional lines saw it as their duty to go among the lower classes and inculcate proper morals and behavior, but for black women and men the weight of racial prejudice and historical subjugation gave a different urgency to the work. This intensity was further heightened for many by the tendency among whites, which Gatewood cites above, to racialize any transgression by a person of color. Black newspapers and other writings were full of complaints about the entire race being blamed for the bad acts of individuals. There is an interesting inversion in these arguments: the elite desired to be the standard by which the race was judged, seeing themselves as ideal racial representatives, but they deplored a parallel practice of judging the race according to the behaviors and actions of their social inferiors. If we incorporate the perspective of such scholars as Robin D.G. Kelley, the picture is complicated further by the idea that those social inferiors probably did not share the ideas of their “betters” about what showed the race to most advantage, and in many cases may not in fact have thought or cared much about how the race – as a race – was perceived.⁶⁵

In Washington those inferiors were as separate from black elites and middle classes as they were from whites – and in some ways even more, as some refused to work in black households.⁶⁶ To a certain extent, for the very poor as for the elite, class distinctions actually mattered more than those of race. Though often just around a corner or two, alley life was a world away from the townhouse existence on the streets outside, as far distant as the tenement scenes of New York City were from the brownstones and mansions of Fifth Avenue and its environs. Physical proximity had no bearing on

⁶⁵ See, among others, Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

⁶⁶ Gatewood, *Aristocrats*, 196.

lifestyle, and the poor were less interested in or persuaded by the advice and attentions reformers offered than the latter would have liked. Reform efforts were frequently as likely to alienate as to engage, and the material aid they received did little to alter the worldview of its recipients.⁶⁷

In a period when other U.S. cities were taking in vast numbers of European immigrants, there were very few arriving in D.C.; the city's lack of major industry prevented its becoming a major destination for poor non-native whites.⁶⁸ But though the city was anomalous in this period for its paucity of poor immigrants, it did have an immiserated mass over which to worry, and upon which to focus its reformist energies. Jacob Riis himself reported to Congress in 1904 on the alleys:

There is nothing good in that kind of alley. The people who live in there are as far off from the life that goes on outside as though they did not belong to you....What ever standard you set up to live by and to live up to, they do not have. They can do almost as they please in there.⁶⁹

Alley dwellers were typical of the period's "dangerous masses": separate, degraded, and not responsible to the standards which dominant classes viewed as imperative. Attempts at alley reform were born and died fairly regularly in the turn of the century years. They were generally unsuccessful, due to the perpetual housing crisis and the income they provided to their landlords, and perhaps also to the whimsical – and in some cases transient – nature of the city's wealthy white reformists.⁷⁰ Black Washington had been called the "secret city" since late in the nineteenth century, but it would seem that any

⁶⁷ See for instance Christine Stansell, *City of Women*; Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*; as well as Borchert.

⁶⁸ Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 63-64.

⁶⁹ Jacob Riis, "The Housing Problem Facing Congress," *Charities* 12 (2/6/1904), quoted in Borchert, 55-56.

⁷⁰ It bears remembering that a substantial portion of the city's more prosperous residents were by definition transients, as they were there as elected representatives and their staff.

secrecy lay less in real invisibility or black efforts at privacy or separateness than in white citizens' ability to elide – or at least ignore – awareness of their black neighbors' lives and doings.⁷¹

Though there was some racial mixing within a few alleys, they were mostly segregated. Militating against the kind of racial separation that would come later, however, was the fact that the alleys were dispersed around the city. According to James Borchert, they were “‘mini-ghettoes’ ...spread throughout the city, often in close proximity to the most expensive and elegant houses.”⁷² Because of the physical layout of the city, and because access to them was usually inconspicuous, the alleys were in many ways invisible. In 1909 the Washington reformer Charles Weller contended that “resourceful people live[d] for years in attractive residences on the avenues without knowing or affecting in the slightest degree the life of the alley hovels just behind them.”⁷³

It seems relatively unlikely, however, that the city's residents, of whatever class or race, were unaware of alley life; it was a constant source of comment and concern, particularly in the turn of the century years. In 1902, in fact, at Weller's suggestion, in one of the city's periodic attempts at addressing the issue, a number of leading white Washingtonians formed the Committee on the Improvement of Housing Conditions, specifically in order to “attack” the alley problem.⁷⁴ One attempt at alley reform was spearheaded by the first Mrs. Woodrow Wilson. It was so important to her that she was purported to have told her husband on the day she died that “she would rest happier if she

⁷¹ On “secret city,” Borchert, *Alley Life*, 14.

⁷² Borchert, *Alley Life*, 2.

⁷³ quoted in *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁴ Green, *Secret City*, 152.

knew” that a reform bill which she had been instrumental in devising had passed. The story led to the passage of the bill, though no law came of it in the end. The alleys, decrepit though they were, housed thousands of people, for whom there was no place else to go. They also provided substantial income to their owners as they were, which made the expense and trouble of rehabilitating or improving them seem unnecessary to those who could have actually made it happen.⁷⁵

The alleys did not by any means define black Washington, however. In the early twentieth century, though African Americans were dispersed around the city, they dominated two residential areas, often called “black belts,” one in the northwest “from S street to V street going north and from First street to Fourteenth street going west. The other is the well known ‘blood field’ district in the southwest section of the city.”⁷⁶ It appears that the latter area was at this time home base for the city’s black bootleggers, and probably for other criminal types, though they must have done much of their actual business in Northwest, around U Street. In the late 1800s, following the Civil War influx, Southwest had held the largest concentration of black citizens in the city, but by the early twentieth century it had become both more densely populated and more mixed racially; most of its residents, at least other than the bootleggers, were poor. Some of the city’s most notorious alleys were in Southwest.⁷⁷

The black section northwest of the National Mall covered a larger area and was generally more prosperous, containing middle class neighborhoods, Howard University, and the strip along the U Street corridor, which was the city’s most important black

⁷⁵ Borchert, *Alley Life*, 47; Green, *Secret City*, 163.

⁷⁶ Loving, “Conditions Among Negroes in Washington,” report to Director of Military Intelligence, 8/10/1919, Negro Subversion file, 10218-350, RG 165, National Archives.

⁷⁷ Fitzpatrick and Goodwin, *Guide*, 43.

commercial zone. Sometimes called the city's "Black Broadway," U Street (often spelled "You" in African American publications) between Seventh and Fifteenth Streets was the center of black business, commerce, and nightlife from the start of the twentieth century until it was more than half over.⁷⁸ In those first decades, the black city bustled and thrived, culturally and socially productive, ambitious, a national center. The Howard Theater, which opened in 1910 on the corner of Seventh and T Streets, was the nation's first black legitimate theater, showing everything from Shakespeare to vaudeville. A few blocks away was the Whitelaw Hotel, the city's "only first-class hotel and apartment building for black visitors and residents," where visiting notables stayed, and notable locals lived.⁷⁹ Not far away, the area around Howard University grew into a black enclave as the school's faculty and administration shifted from white to black and the institution became a magnet not just for students but for intellectuals, scientists, and artists. Black residential concentration, such as it was, centered in this newly built and growing area of the northwest, and to a slightly lesser extent in the more "pastoral" southeast.⁸⁰ Washington was the capital of black America in these years, the center of African American thought and action, aspiration and achievement.⁸¹ In some ways it filled this function for the nation's black citizens more fully than for any other group – just one of the ironies of the racial dynamic at the city's heart.

The (White) City (Beautiful)

The claim that Washington is both typical and unique could readily be made about any city; nevertheless that dynamic is particularly central to the history of the

⁷⁸ Ibid., 161-63; Paul K. Williams, *Greater U Street* (Charleston: Arcadia, 2002), 7.

⁷⁹ Fitzpatrick and Goodwin, *Guide*, 122-24; 142.

⁸⁰ Anacostia, 74.

⁸¹ E. Franklin Frazier, "Research Projects/Negro Youth Study/National Committee on Segregation in the Nation's Capital – Report," Frazier papers, box 131-107, folder 1, MSRC, 23.

capital, and especially to the way the events of 1919 unfolded. The continual expansion of the city through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is certainly a point of typicality; yet unlike most other growing cities, Washington's growth was only indirectly related to industrial expansion.⁸² The capital grew as the federal government grew, and from the Civil War years on, the federal government grew tremendously. During the 1860s the number of jobs in that sector increased steadily, and consequently enlarged the proportion of government employees in the city. In the next few decades these numbers continued to explode, so that by 1910 government employees constituted a quarter of the city's workforce.⁸³

In the late nineteenth century, as railroads had expanded, becoming more efficient and less expensive, they enabled more people to travel more frequently. Washington, D.C. was designed to accommodate visitors, short- and long-term, with numerous hotels and restaurants, services and entertainments, and also without some of the detriments of major industrial cities. Between 1893 and 1903, the number of major gatherings in Washington each year doubled, thanks in part to its image – and self-promotion – as the national city, belonging to everyone. As an example, one aspect of the marketing was that meetings of national organizations there would foster unity because they didn't promote one state or region over another.⁸⁴

The capital became a destination for the conventions of all sorts of organizations, from fraternal societies to commercial and professional associations, as well as those

⁸² Eric Monkkonen, *America Becomes Urban* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

⁸³ Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 100-101. His sources: U.S. Department of Commerce, *Historical Statistics of the United States* (Washington, D.C. : U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975) and U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *Federal Civilian Workforce Statistics: Annual Report by Geographic Areas* (Washington, D.C. : Government Printing Office, 1990).

⁸⁴ Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 114.

involved in the growing public service sector. Additionally, railroad companies offered special summer fares to the capital for families and schoolteachers, and by the early twentieth century travel to Washington had acquired “the dimensions of pilgrimage. In the civil religion of American nationalism, Washington was a ‘metropolis’ in its technical meaning, the home of national temples and cathedrals.”⁸⁵

After government and tourism, real estate was the city’s third major source of employment and revenue in the early twentieth century.⁸⁶ The city’s ongoing real estate boom was contingent on the rapid growth of government in the decades following the Civil War and ever after. The growing federal workforce in turn fed thriving service and professional sectors – they needed to be housed, fed, clothed, entertained, and cleaned up after, as well as cared for when ill or in legal distress, when they married, gave birth, and died. As a result, most economic and cultural entities and sectors in the city relied to a considerable if perhaps indirect extent upon the government. The service sector was largely the purview of African American citizens and provided many with the means of real prosperity. Frank Carpenter, a newspaperman from Cleveland wrote in the late nineteenth century about caterers in the city:

He is usually a colored gentleman, who supplies families and single boarders with meals at so much a month. Twenty dollars per person is the average price. For that he will bring you breakfast and dinner in a square tin box to your rooms, every morning and evening for thirty days.⁸⁷

This arrangement, including morning and evening meals but not midday, indicates the arrangement a single working person of reasonable means, living alone and without a servant or perhaps a kitchen – but not in a boardinghouse – might make. It also seems to

⁸⁵ Ibid., 113-115.

⁸⁶ Green, *Secret City*, 175.

⁸⁷ Frank Carpenter, ed. *Carp’s Washington* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1960), 6.

denote middle-class expectations: such a person would not cook for him or herself, but would choose to eat at home rather than at more expensive restaurants or cheaper taverns, respectively. The fact that this scenario was common enough for it to be Carpenter's example can be seen as evidence of both the ordinariness of that lifestyle and the symbiosis of government with service sectors in the city.

The Board of Commissioners, three men appointed by the president, dealt with basic services in the city. There was, by design, little room for civic participation in this form of governance. In 1889 business and civic leaders established the Washington Board of Trade, which subsequently functioned as a kind of "shadow government," speaking for business and investors. It was distinct in its goals and functions from the Chamber of Commerce which appeared two decades later, and which had a much narrower focus. The Board of Trade operated across "areas ranging from economic development to government and public services," performing quasi-governmental functions and running the city in a manner consistent with the "formally representative business-reform governments" that emerged in other cities after the turn of the century.⁸⁸ In its early years, the Board included a number of African American businessmen.

National electoral processes created a stream of permanent transiency in Washington's population – elected and appointed officials came and went with the tides of politics, carrying along their families and staffs; this exchange of personnel was one significant way in which the seat of government was directly connected to the national populace and at the same time entirely apart. The capital thus reflected the nation in certain ways, and also perhaps had more visibility, if not direct influence than other individual cities on the national stage. One important instance of this connection lay in

⁸⁸ Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 78.

the relationship between the capital and the nation's economic centers. Though it had never achieved economic (read commercial or industrial) power, the turn of the century vision for Washington was that it "could operate the controls on the engines of industrial prosperity while other cities stoked the furnaces and oiled the gears." As national systems emerged – whether infrastructural, economic, or associational – the national city, symbolic (if not actual) heart of these systems, gained importance. "With an expanding public administration paralleling the growth of corporate management and professional organization, Washington thus became a national city in practice as well as aspiration."⁸⁹

The capital city came to exemplify an important national trend in city development during these years. As the nineteenth century came to a close, an intensified style of city planning came into ascendance. The intense crowding, dirt, and chaos of industrial cities was a point of concern – moral, aesthetic, and practical. The cities would not continue to work if they persisted in such a mess. They were unhealthy and disorganized, and the trend in industry and government bureaucracy toward efficiency and scientific management resonated into the arena of city administration. As city bureaucracies expanded, sanitation and efficiency in organizing the physical space was a central concern. In Washington this inclination found fruitful – if largely symbolic – ground.

The neoclassical style of many government buildings and monuments was the product of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century construction boom as the city grew to accommodate the burgeoning government. It was explicitly connected to the "City Beautiful" movement which came into full expression with the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The capital city was to illustrate in its physicality the Great Ideas

⁸⁹ Abbott, 102-04.

of American democracy, to become the “open air cathedral for American patriotism.”⁹⁰ Since the republic was based on its founders’ conception of classical democracy, what better structures for the government to inhabit but grandiose replications of the temples and palaces of classical Greece and Rome? The financial and political vicissitudes of the city’s first century had prevented the full realization of this idea. In its earliest days the city suffered from Congressional reluctance to appropriate adequate funds for public works, a recalcitrance which fed Washingtonians’ early insecurities as to the government’s commitment to the site for its home. After the British destroyed the city in 1812, however, the rebuilding of the capital became a point of pride for the national government, and lingering questions about its appropriateness gradually disappeared. But funding and energy were not immediately forthcoming, and it was not until the 1893 Columbian Exhibition in Chicago and the movement it inspired that the “seat of empire,” as the city saw itself, truly began to express itself – its official self – in the style it still retains.⁹¹

The Progressive-era concept of the city beautiful was based on a philosophical and even psychological reaction against the old city – organic, unplanned, haphazard, inefficient, dirty, the child of necessity rather than inspiration. The progressivist concept of environmentalism, the idea that one’s surroundings were central to the development of morality and personality, was central to the city beautiful movement. In this view, a child brought up in physical squalor was doomed to submit to and perpetuate it; if the child were to have access to other environments, to light and space, then he would have a choice about his direction in life. In a typical expression, Jacob Riis wrote in his

⁹⁰ Ibid., 104.

⁹¹ WPA, 65.

description of park building in New York, “The playground is here to wrestle with the gang for the boy, and it will win.”⁹²

The city beautiful was not just intended to rescue the poor, however. It was also a means of inspiring and expressing the superiority of the dominant classes and individuals for whom it was such an important concept. At the turn of the century Washington’s self-image was hopeful, self-promoting, energized. This idea was aptly expressed by one of the city’s daily papers:

Oh my sister cities of the land, harken to me... Young and strong, fair of body, clean of mind, I have kept our faith. I live and grow, in beauty and power, in the strength of the spirit that makes for good....I am the Capital and blood kin to our Mecca of the East. Day by day, year by year, century by century, I will grow....It shall be mine, by the example that I teach, to put order in thy houses, where disorder now reigns. It shall be mine to teach thee cleanliness of body and of mind, and honesty and the municipal faith. It shall be mine to teach thee the meaning and show thee the soul of the beauty that lies within and the beauty that shines without.⁹³

In a metaphor typical of the time, the city is an entity here, “Columbia,” an idealized allegorical figure leading the nation, and particularly other cities, to greatness. The idea of Manifest Destiny was driving the nation, with simultaneous imperialist expansion across the continent and the assimilation at home of thousand of newcomers from beyond the oceans. Washington could see itself as the force behind this energy, planning and fueling the expansion; attracting, encompassing, and making productive the immigrant masses.

⁹² Jacob Riis, *The Battle with the Slum* (New York: Macmillan, 1902).

⁹³ Washington *Evening Star*, 1/1/1909.

Further, the idea of teaching “municipal faith” fit the reformist spirit as well as the industrial reality of the time. Political corruption in city governments was an easy target for proselytizers and propagandizers, no matter what their agenda. Manifest Destiny was not just about land, it was about cultural dominance, a belief in superiority based both in ancient paradigms about chosen people as well as contemporary scientific theories of racial hierarchy. In her examination of the 1893 Exposition Gail Bederman shows how its White City was envisioned as the highest expression of human progress and potential – and that “the millennial perfection [it] embodied was composed of equal parts of white supremacy and powerful manhood.”⁹⁴

It was appropriate for the nation’s capital to claim for itself the task of leading the way in “municipal hygiene” – a contemporary idea which encompassed a moral even more than a physical dimension. Since it was born so differently than other cities – an immaculate conception, really – Washington might be seen to be free of the inherent sinfulness other cities could not escape, given their own more mundane origins. So it was in some sense easy for the city to project an idea of its own exemplary nature, its ability to make real the fantasy of innate superiority. Never having faced many of the challenges to which more organically-formed cities were subject, far from the frontier, built according to a unitary idea (though still expanding), the capital could – indeed had to – see and project itself as both vessel and expression of those energies and ideas which America chose to name as its defining ones.

In 1901 the Senate established a Park Commission, known as the McMillan Commission. Its charge was to consider “the location and grouping of public buildings and monuments to be erected in the District of Columbia and the development and

⁹⁴ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 31.

improvement of the entire park system of said District.”⁹⁵ Members of the commission included some of the most notable builders and planners of the time, such as Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Charles F. McKim, and Daniel H. Burnham. Their plan encompassed the entire Mall area, and called for a rededication to “the original plan [of L’Enfant] and to adapt the principles of its design to new and enlarged conditions.”⁹⁶

One of the central goals of the planners was that government buildings and monuments would be expressive not just of the ideals of the republic in their design, a longstanding hope, but that they be unified in this expression. The hodgepodge nature of prior construction showed a lack of coherence which contradicted the national image the planners and their government funders wanted to project.⁹⁷ The idea was that the metropolis would express the virtue and power of its people, even as it inspired them to further heights of achievement and moral probity. Through its physical beauty the city would inspire its inhabitants – and in this case, indeed, the nation – to noble thought and action. In the City Beautiful, people inclined to corruption were offered an alternative direction and the virtuous were inspired and supported in their good tendencies. By providing its residents architectural beauty and harmonious green space the city would play an active part in the progress of the polity. The McMillan Commission was but the first of a series of commissions and planning bodies which the Congress would devise for the improvement of the official city over the next several decades. According to Abbott, “national goals outweighed concerns with the functioning of the residential city.”⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 116; WPA, 65.

⁹⁶ WPA, 65.

⁹⁷ Green, *Washington: Capital City*, v. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 135.

⁹⁸ Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 116-117; WPA, 66.

Tourism, already established as the city's second most important resource and *raison d'être*, became even more essential, and according to Abbott, the city's "new role as a national attractor was explicitly political." Not only was the capital to "inspire awe at the history and promise of the nation," but it was also to be the site of national reconciliation. It would realize its initial promise as a site of sectional compromise and coming together, rather than a breaking-off point.⁹⁹ The architectural echoes of major nineteenth-century European cityscapes were an intentional assertion of Washington's equivalence to the other world capitals, and were intended to transmit the "majesty and stateliness of the whole nation."¹⁰⁰ The city was finally becoming the national center, "the symbol...of national achievement."¹⁰¹ Scholars have also pointed to a connection between the increasingly monumental federal city and the growing power of the executive branch in these years.¹⁰²

The expanding government offered new employment opportunity not just to the city's African Americans, but also to another emerging sector: white women. The federal government was actually an innovator in the extension of the sphere of respectable work for middle class women. Because of a Civil War shortage of male clerks the Treasury had hired women to handle bonds and currency. As they turned out to be reliable as well as cheap, their numbers in federal offices began to climb. This trend was also taking place in the business world, as the "information revolution meant increasing demand for clerks, telephone operators, stenographers, and 'typewriters.'" More women than men in the late nineteenth century were gaining high school diplomas, and these women

⁹⁹ Abbott, 115-116.

¹⁰⁰ Wendell P. Stafford, "A Capital of Capitals: The Future of Washington," *Speeches of Wendell Phillips Stafford* (St Johnsbury, VT: Arthur F. Stone, 1913), 255-57. In Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 116.

¹⁰¹ Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 119.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 211-12 n. 51, citing Tobin, "Shadow of the Capitol."

increasingly took the newly available desk jobs that resulted from the expansion of the business and bureaucracy sectors.¹⁰³

According to Carl Abbott, Washington led the “gender transformation of the American office at least until World War I.” By 1910, women were one third of all workers in the city, as compared to 21 percent of workers in the nation. Sixteen percent of all working women in D.C. held clerical positions; seven percent did nationwide.¹⁰⁴ What this meant was that the landscape of the capital encompassed a considerable number of single women, white as well as black, who worked steady, respectable, non-menial jobs other than school teaching. This was a national trend, but the high concentration of such women set the city apart. In the case of government employment, black women, like black men, were of course often relegated to the lower status jobs. But federal employment at any level was a source of status as well as relative financial security, on both sides of the color line. Until Woodrow Wilson took office the federal workplace was racially as well as sexually integrated, if hierarchically organized.

The Wilson Years

President Wilson’s administration was led by southerners who actively sought to bring into federal buildings and public spaces the degree and kind of racial organization they thought worked best. What this meant was not simply segregation of workspaces and facilities, or the exclusion of black visitors from public galleries and restaurants in the Capitol and other sites often visited by tourists. Even those “honorific” government positions which had continued to be held by African Americans after the Organic Act in 1878 were passed to white men. Most government offices returned to the practice of

¹⁰³ Abbott, 93-94. See also, Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*.

¹⁰⁴ Abbott, 94-95.

hiring blacks only for the lowest positions. A new requirement for federal job seekers emerged: applicants must submit photos along with their qualifications.¹⁰⁵

This was not an altogether sudden shift. The city had been “resouthernizing” for the past two decades, as Reconstruction fell apart, “Redemption” took hold, and the majority of white northerners lost what concern they had for the rights of black citizens in the interests of “reconciliation.” In these years, and especially after 1890, Washington’s population was increasingly more southern than it had been, among both blacks and whites. Northern-born whites retained an edge in numbers over those born in the south, but in the decades around the turn of the century the proportion of white southerners arriving in the city increased by about twice as much as that of white northerners.¹⁰⁶ In the same period, black southerners continued to make their way to the capital in large numbers; between 1880 and 1930 some 40 percent of black Washingtonians were native-born, and a substantial majority of transplants were coming from the deep south. Prior to this time more black migrants had come from nearby Virginia and Maryland.

What this meant, at least in part, was that the city began to have a more southern flavor than before, especially in terms of race relations. “De facto segregation appeared in hotels, restaurants, theaters, and hospitals in the early 1900s” even as some congressmen and white citizens were calling for the re-segregation of the public transport system (which had been integrated in 1865). Blacks were suddenly excluded from the Board of Trade and the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, both organizations that they had

¹⁰⁵ Frazier, “Research Projects/Negro Youth Study/National Committee on Segregation in the Nation’s Capital – Report,” Frazier papers, box 131-107, folder 1, MSRC, 24.

¹⁰⁶ Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 81-85. U.S. Census data 1870-1930 cited and discussed, 84-85. See also, Frazier, 24.

been full participants in for years.¹⁰⁷ This was a manifestation of the racial constriction that was happening around the country. In Washington though, until 1919 there was no major violence associated with the limitations.

Through these years the black city retained a confident and self-reliant professional elite, as well as a small number of public officials such as Judge Robert Terrell of the Municipal Court. Black merchants and workers in the service occupations were generally doing well, though certain arenas like the skilled trades had closed to black men. Socially, artistically, and intellectually, as well as commercially, the black city was busy, vibrant, and essentially secure. But white congressmen and citizens continued for years to push for limitations on government employment for blacks, to agitate for jim crow cars, and to make interracial sectors of the environment much less hospitable to blacks. According to Lewis, as early as the turn of the century “not even Frederick Douglass could have dined in a downtown restaurant.”¹⁰⁸ Blacks in D.C. complained of being kept out of the viewing galleries at the Capitol, of newly separate and inferior bathrooms, and of being mistreated in government lunchrooms or forced to travel too far on their lunch breaks to reach those designated for their use.¹⁰⁹

The District Branch of the NAACP was organized in March of 1912, and over a thousand people came to its first rally. President Wilson refused to meet with delegates from the branch who called on him soon after he took office, setting off a summer of protest against his segregationist policies, especially in government departments. The branch’s actions included a letter-writing campaign and the collection of data on segregation from members who were government employees. In the first and second

¹⁰⁷ Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 87.

¹⁰⁸ Lewis, *D.C.*, 74.

¹⁰⁹ Branch Files, G34, NAACP records, MSRC.

decades of the twentieth century, the District branch fought hard – and successfully – against successive bills to segregate public transport in the city, as well as repeated attempts to outlaw intermarriage. “Although many people in the black community opposed intermarriage themselves, few were willing to have Congress curb their freedom to marry the person of their choice.”¹¹⁰ Both the recurring appearance and the failure of these bills are significant, showing the strong segregationist impulse of the time but also the lack of unity among white legislators as to the propriety and legality of that inclination.

The ascension of Woodrow Wilson to the presidency intensified and accelerated a process of increasing racial antagonism that was already underway. Frazier asserted that the “era...marked a decisive turning point in race relations” in D.C., one of “general and rapid deterioration...”¹¹¹ As the level of racial violence around the nation climbed (see Chapter 1), black Washingtonians explicitly connected the situation in the capital to what was happening everywhere. Insult, physical attack, and legal restrictions were all seen as part of the general problem. One 1915 letter to Archibald Grimke from a Howard University official referenced some kind of racial attack, probably not in D.C.:

I do not see much remedy in affairs like this except that the Colored men who are attacked will defend themselves even if they kill somebody.... This sort of thing will go on until some white people are murdered, then it will stop the people who start it. The people who do it are cowards and therefore fear death.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Moore, *Leading the Race*, 205-06.

¹¹¹ Frazier, “Research Projects/Negro Youth Study/National Committee on Segregation in the Nation’s Capital – Report,” Frazier papers, box 131-107, folder 1, 24, 28. MSRC.

¹¹² George William Cook to Grimke, Archibald Grimke Papers, NAACP correspondence 1913-15, Box 39-25, folder 515, MSRC.

As white violence increased, even respectable university officials (Cook was Howard's business manager) saw no better solution than black self defense.

The NAACP archives contain copies of numerous letters complaining of and seeking to undo the segregation of federal buildings. One letter from a postal worker in New York City protests the segregation of the cafeteria in the new Post Office building on Eighth Avenue. Decrying the whites-only policy in all the "decent lunch rooms" in the neighborhood, he describes the predicament of black employees.

A new regulation prevents all employees from eating anywhere on the premises except in the lunch room, and as all of the colored employees with a few exceptions...are laborers or messengers, they must remain at their work until 12 and must be at their post of duty at 12:30, or lose ½ hour. If they patronize the lunch room, they are not allowed to go to the counter and buy food, but must go to the kitchen door, where there is no one to wait upon them but the cook, and usually he is at the counter until all the white employees have been served. The lunch rooms in the neighborhood discriminate, but any colored man can go to the counter and buy what he wants and walk out, but here in the Post Office in a café run by the Government, a colored man can't even go to the counter.¹¹³

The writer goes on to complain about the unkempt state of the room designated for black employees, and calls on the Association to "take steps to rectify [the state of affairs]."

In Washington there were unique arenas for trouble and for activism. Members reported incidents and systems of racial mistreatment to the NAACP's D.C. branch, which would then initiate public complaints. There were efforts like the above, where African American employees fought workplace segregation. One letter enclosed a War Department order segregating lavatories and toilets. In a typical expression of New Negro thinking, the writer explained his reasons for taking action: "[B]eing a young man, whose

¹¹³ Stephen O. Plummer to NAACP NYC Branch, 6/10/1915. Grimke NAACP correspondence 1913-15, folder 512. MSRC

breast is filled with self-respect and race pride and a member of the NAACP, I could not rest in peace without writing this letter.” He saw the order as not only insulting but casting aspersions on the character and behavior of black workers, and furthermore, disruptive of the department’s status quo:

...[T]he colored men in the State, War and Navy building are mannerable, polite and self-respecting, and there is no demand for segregation. I have been in the War Dept. for six years and have not heard of any friction between the races, and men who have been employed here for fifty years tell me the races in this building have always been friendly and agreeable and that there has never been and is not now any demand for such an order.¹¹⁴

Action against de facto discrimination in federal public spaces was also on the NAACP’s agenda. In the fall of 1917 the District branch sent letters to a number of senators protesting the recent exclusion of black visitors from the Ladies’ Gallery and the restaurant of the Capitol. Opening with a reminder that they are citizens “under the constitution of our country” and that in claiming access to the galleries and restaurants they claim “a privilege or a right which is denied to no class of citizens, to no race of men – not even to aliens or to alien enemies.” As in so many other instances, activists explicitly connected black military service to citizenship rights. The letter continues,

Colored women whose fathers, husbands, sons, and brothers have been conscripted into the army of the United States are not allowed access to your Ladies gallery, and Colored men, wearing the uniform of American soldiers are denied accommodation in your restaurant for no other and better reason than that they belong to that part of your fellow citizens known as Negroes.

Honorable Senators, is our country at war to make the world safe for democracy, irrespective of the race or color of its multitudinous peoples, or has our country declared war against Germany merely to make the world safe for

¹¹⁴ Letter, 8/10/1916. Grimke NAACP correspondence, box 39-26, folder 526. MSRC

white peoples? Are its Colored citizens not included in this glorious object, for which they are taxed and for which also they are expected to die?¹¹⁵

The outcome appears to have been unsatisfactory. The file contains responses from several senators to the effect that they have been informed by the Sergeant-at-Arms that there is no policy restricting black visitors from the galleries and counseling patience. “These are serious times and I believe your people will lose nothing by forbearance. I know that your load is heavy and I shall do everything in my power to lighten it.”¹¹⁶

When they took action against indignities such as being locked out of viewing galleries and restaurants, African Americans in Washington were fighting discrimination on multiple levels. The fact that two generations earlier their elite had been dining in downtown restaurants and holding elected office was part of what drove these protests. The fights were not about inclusion per se; black Washingtonians did not seek to be integrated into the white city – they had abundant sources of education, amusement, and to a considerable extent, housing and employment. But their restriction from national public space, the very space which uniquely defined their city, was – especially in this period – intolerable. As Kathleen Wolgemuth shows, African Americans across the country likewise recognized and responded to the national implications they saw built into segregationist efforts in the capital, whether in government offices or public spaces.¹¹⁷

The public transport system was another site of perpetual interracial confrontation, in the capital as in the nation. The record shows an essentially continuous

¹¹⁵ Draft/copy of letter, 9/26/1917. Grimke NAACP correspondence, box 39-26, folder 539. MSRC

¹¹⁶ Senator Jones to Grimke, 10/4/1917. Grimke NAACP correspondence, box 39-26, folder 540. MSRC

¹¹⁷ Kathleen Wolgemuth, “Woodrow Wilson and Federal Segregation,” *Journal of Negro History*, (April 1959), 158-73.

fight over segregated streetcars and trains over the decades following emancipation. The experiences of some of the nation's most prominent African Americans show how important and contentious this issue was for all concerned. In 1865, Sojourner Truth was physically ejected from a seat by a white streetcar conductor in the nation's capital. The year before, a black major in the Union Army on his way to an official government proceeding had been similarly treated.¹¹⁸ A decade later, years before the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling in the Supreme Court Ida B. Wells had been dragged off a train in Tennessee "with the conductor's flesh between her teeth," and had taken the railroad company to court. She won in the circuit but eventually lost in state supreme court, in "the first case in which a colored plaintiff in the South had appealed to a state court since the repeal of the Civil Rights Bill [1875]...The gist of that decision was that Negroes were not wards of the nation but citizens of the individual states, and should therefore appeal to the state courts instead of to the federal court."¹¹⁹ This was 1887.

Some nine years later the United States Supreme Court would implicitly uphold the verdict against Wells, validating the "separate but equal" principle with its ruling in *Plessy*. W.E.B. Du Bois himself had a fight with a railroad in 1899 or 1900, when he was refused his overnight berth on a train and forced to ride in the "colored" car. As Lewis explains it, "What made racial discrimination so hard to bear for Du Bois was not only (or not even?) the enforced segregation but the utter, arrogant absence of all discrimination along class lines...."¹²⁰ Whites' refusal to recognize class differences among blacks was galling to elites for a number of reasons. Not only were obvious

¹¹⁸ Anacostia, 94, 87-88.

¹¹⁹ Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*, 244; Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 18-20.

¹²⁰ Lewis, *Du Bois: Biography*, 243-44.

distinctions among African Americans erased, but whites of inferior status were privileged over wealthy, educated, and cultured blacks. This dynamic was perhaps most frequently and distressingly illustrated in black accounts via gender, in situations where a lower class white man found himself in a position of power over a genteel black woman, or over her man, thus robbing the latter of his manhood and implicitly or actively threatening her virtue and gentility.

The intense class consciousness of Washington's black middle and upper classes functioned in their judgments not just of one another and lower class African Americans but also of whites, and of white leaders in particular. On July 19, 1919 the very day the riot started, the *Washington Bee* printed on its editorial page an excoriation of a white congressman for remarks connected to a bill outlawing an increase in pay for "colored messengers, laborers, charwomen and all others who [did] laboring work" in government buildings." The editorial quoted Congressman Blanton at length, complaining of the uselessness of hundreds of black government employees, and detailing their salaries and schedules. The *Bee* proceeded with a class-based ad hominem attack on Blanton:

Men like Blanton are not used to good living. He does not know what it takes for a gentleman to live – even a laborer – and certainly there are thousands of laborers who live better than Blanton. His remarks in the House should be read with interest, because a schoolboy could make a speech 10 per cent better than Blanton.

Blanton wouldn't make a good farmer, because there is one thing a farmer will do – and that is to live like a gentleman. If every colored citizen in Blanton's district were permitted to vote, where would Blanton be? He certainly would not be in Congress.¹²¹

It is, in a way, a reconfiguration of the argument used by some white suffragists, that white women of superior breeding and education deserved the vote more than black men.

¹²¹ "Too Much Money," editorial, *Washington Bee*, 7/19/1919.

Class, reflected through a gendered lens, provides the basis for the critique of this congressman who doesn't "know what it takes for a gentleman to live." If he did know what it took, in other words, he wouldn't assume that the government could do without the personnel who civilized the halls of government with their services. The closing sentence of the editorial is "THE BEE sympathizes with Blanton's servant – if he has one." This dig references a whole world of class prejudice. Blanton, if he in fact had the means to employ a servant, would not have had the good breeding to know how to treat that servant well, as a true gentleman would.

The idea that a laborer would know better how to live than a congressman also seems to refer to the fact that in black Washington, class status was not necessarily tied directly to one's job, though it could be. The porters and charwomen whose wages Blanton decried "because they are useless jobs, worth nothing to this Government, and such waste and extravagance should stop," were doing well for themselves, and were furthermore almost certainly a part of the audience the *Bee* addressed in the editorial. Finally, also underlying this editorial, which toward the end states simply, "All the colored man asks is a chance to breathe, and everything else will come to him," is the reality that in the Wilson years, many of the economic opportunities that had made Washington relatively welcoming for African Americans, especially in the years since Reconstruction, were either disappearing or under grave threat. African Americans were increasingly restricted to menial and service work and kept out of the more lucrative and respectable government jobs. Further, their chances of advancement based on merit were severely restricted. Notable exceptions to this reality were more visible in D.C. than most other places, but the *Bee* is citing the reality most people faced, and condemning it.

The hapless Blanton serves as both foil for the writer's implications about class and breeding and as exemplar of the forces trying to hold black people back. The implication, that it was those whites who lacked civilization – here in the form of gentlemanliness – that sought the repression of blacks, was a central theme in black critiques of white racism in this period. Ida B. Wells' antilynching campaign, for instance, hinged rhetorically on the argument that the barbarity of lynching demonstrated a disastrous lack of civilization among American whites, and that the failure to enact antilynching legislation was proof of that same lack in the U.S. government.¹²² Congressman Blanton, at least as depicted by the *Washington Bee*, provided apt evidence for that argument.

Part of the capital's draw for African Americans in the post-Reconstruction years had been the fact that it was largely free of the extremes of racial violence blacks faced in the American south (if not necessarily of the sentiments behind that violence). Indeed, from at least the 1870s, African American social and political activists from Booker T. Washington to Wells and various leaders of the NAACP often found themselves in the city, lobbying Congress or meeting with other black leaders – many of whom, like Frederick Douglass, lived in the city – to strategize and negotiate. The city, as the black newspaper publisher and uplift activist Mary Ann Shadd Cary once said, was “the Capital of the Country[,] the central point of national hopes and aspirations,...the Mecca of the colored pilgrim seeking civil religious social and business enlightenment, and preferment or protection.”¹²³

¹²² Bederman, Ch 2.

¹²³ quoted in Moore, *Leading the Race*, 21.

It may be that to some extent the confiscation of federal jobs was a bigger blow to the figurative well-being of black Washingtonians than to the material, undermining as it did the historically based image of the city as a haven, a land of opportunity for black citizens. The elite professionals – doctors, lawyers, university professors, ministers, business proprietors – and members of the middle or “striving” classes – teachers, businesspeople, and even some of those who held clerkships in federal agencies – were not so much economically as politically and socially distressed by Wilsonian segregation, at least initially. Likewise, those who held more menial positions in and out of government were essentially secure, Congressman Blanton notwithstanding. The economic threat contained in symbolic attacks was real, however. The loss of a few appointed offices was a real blow, but a newly instated requirement that applicants for federal jobs enclose photos with their applications was another order of magnitude. In fighting the segregation of lunchrooms and office spaces, African American government employees and their allies were attempting to hold both economic and social ground.

New Negro City

The intricacies of class and race in Washington were byzantine, both within and across racial barriers. Black Washington was known for color as well as class distinctions, and for the frequent conflation of the two. At the same time, that equation was not consistent. There were exceedingly distinguished black families and individuals who were dark skinned, and light-complexioned African Americans were undoubtedly as common among the poor as the wealthy or middle classes. Nevertheless, color mattered in black Washington, as did class, to the frequent dismay of black observers. Furthermore, there were divisions and competition among members of a given stratum

that went beyond skin color. The city's black aristocracy, sometimes called the "black 400," was as ridden with conflict as any other tight-knit, socially complicated metropolitan elite. Willard Gatewood shows that social factionalism was common among the upper classes of "most sizable black communities," but says that such rivalry had its apex in Washington. In the first decades of the century though, internal divisions lost some of their significance. As racial tension and violence mounted, African Americans in the capital began to draw more closely together, both within and across class lines.¹²⁴

When Washington was in Vogue is an epistolary novel by Edward Christopher Williams, the first African American to graduate from library school, for a time the principal of the M Street School (later Paul Lawrence Dunbar High) in the city and later a teacher and librarian at Howard. The characters in the book, members of black Washington's "Vanity Fair," are educated, intelligent, moral, beautiful, and forward thinking; they epitomize one vision of the New Negro. Though they are frequently confronted with unsavory people and situations, and though moral problems arise, the truly good retain their goodness, and prevail. Throughout the novel they meditate on problems like color prejudice within the race, and the dangers to which African Americans are subject due to their position in relation to the dominant society. One of the characters, a philosopher, Don Verney, comments on the comparative manifestations of white racism in D.C. and elsewhere:

Race hatred in this town is worse than in mid-Georgia. Down there a white man can kill a colored man for any cause or no cause, and with absolute impunity, and he can with the same impunity abuse, beat, cheat, humiliate, and degrade him at will. Knowing this, he does not hate him, unless the colored man shows too great skill or resolution in thwarting his white neighbor in carrying out his most

¹²⁴ Gatewood, *Aristocrats*, 231.

amiable intentions. Up here no white man will try to beat or abuse a colored man unless the odds on his side (the white man's) are at least five or ten to one. If they are less than five to one, the scion of the superior race is liable to get the most of it. Being thus thwarted in his God-given right to beat, cheat, abuse, mutilate, or kill his inferior, his hatred, lacking a vent, eats in. This was the reason why the riots of 1919 were so popular, until the colored people awoke.¹²⁵

Like other African Americans, Williams here sees the riots as the collision of two major forces: a profound, long-standing (and cowardly) white supremacist hatred, and the postwar black determination to stand up to its manifestation in the mob. The popularity of rioting among whites was overturned in Washington because the blacks of that city “awoke” and fought back. Williams’ character offers an analysis of the dynamics of southern race relations, black aspiration and manhood, and the pusillanimous nature of northern white mobs. The argument that white racial hatred was worse in northern cities than in the south was fairly common, and it crossed race and regional lines: many white southerners pointed to the intense violence of northern mobs, contrasting the wild, indiscriminate nature of urban riots to what they described as the measured and judicious meting out of justice by southern lynchers. There were, of course, huge inaccuracies in that formulation, but the point is that the violence of northern white racism was a trope available to a variety of observers. Williams’ novel appeared a few years after the riot, but it represents a view of these incidents which foregrounded white cowardice and black manhood. This analysis was common among African Americans certainly since East St. Louis in 1917 and going back at least to the New York City Draft Riots of 1863. Williams’ analysis also aligns readily with Wells’ civilization critique, and with Du Bois’ exhortations to manly self defense.

¹²⁵ Eric Williams, *When Washington was in Vogue, A Love Story* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 61.

The novel is set in the early twenties and was first published in serial form in the *Messenger*, a national black magazine published by the socialists A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, champions of the “New Crowd Negro.” The book describes a culturally rich and vibrant, complicated, black city; nary a white character appears or is referred to. Ostensibly a love story, it expresses many of the central ideas of the New Negro experience. The central character, Davy Carr, is a former military officer, a veteran of the world war, recently arrived in D.C. to do research for a book on slavery. The book is comprised mostly of his letters to his best friend and fellow veteran, reporting his romantic and social adventures, conversations, and thoughts on life among the black upper crust. Interspersed with the letters reporting his social and romantic progress are extensive excerpts from conversations with and essays written by Verney, who keeps a journal which is a philosophical and political disquisition on the African American condition. Williams, a member of the city’s black elite, puts forward his judgments through this character’s voice (here Davy quotes Verney in one of his letters):

He said, further, that our most prosperous class takes little real interest even in the race question, but that many of the women think only of ‘getting by’ the color line by painting their faces, while the men, for the most part, studiously avoid it, and live strictly within their own self-sufficient circle; that better incomes are making us more cowardly, rather than more bold, for we can now procure in our own circle the satisfactions we once could get only outside, and so we shut our eyes to what we do not wish to see, and then assert that it does not exist; that we love pleasure too much, and that we will spend more both of time and money in following it than any other struggling race in the world.¹²⁶

Williams repeatedly decries color consciousness and prejudice among the elite, usually by looking at standards of women’s beauty. Davy even intends to study “the color line

¹²⁶ Ibid., 39.

within the race” at some point.¹²⁷ But this prejudice is also at times subtly reinscribed. Skin tone is almost always one of the descriptives Davy uses when introducing or describing a character, and though it does not necessarily indicate their moral fiber or likeability, the villain, a sleazy, thieving, spendthrift playboy, is dark-skinned, as are his dangerous companions. On the other hand, he spends much time and ink praising the beauty and goodness of a very dark-skinned woman whose predicament – being beautiful and good, but often overlooked by men because of her darkness – provides the means for his meditations on the problem of black color prejudice.¹²⁸ Class prejudice comes through more subtly, through stereotypical representations of the few non-elite figures,¹²⁹ and implications of the tendency toward moral deficiency and weakness among the uneducated – essentially the same kinds of attitudes white middle-class and elite reformers held about the poor in the same period.

Many commentators besides E.C. Williams, and including Calvin Chase, the editor of the *Washington Bee*, condemned class and color prejudice in black Washington as a singularly destructive problem. One of the effects of white violence was to connect African Americans across class and other lines, to bring together at least temporarily people of different backgrounds, with different agendas. This effect was not lost on whites – at least not all of them. In fact it was a cause of alarm. There is an irony to it: by denying the differences among blacks, by castigating and attacking them according to only one criterion, that of skin color, whites in effect made that criterion primary for their

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹²⁸ Verney is described as “fair, yet with a kind of ruddy brownness.” (17).

¹²⁹ On page 105, for instance.

targets, inspiring race-based solidarity and action that was in turn more threatening to the racial hierarchy the attacks were designed in the first place to support.¹³⁰

The intensely gendered ethos of self defense that was so central to New Negro politics was a unifying point, in the capital and across the nation. The violent manifestation of racial oppression – also rationalized in very gendered terms – inspired a black rhetoric of manly resistance which connected civic and social entitlement to physical assertion. In the capital, black men were increasingly unified by the call to protect themselves, their homes and women in the face of a white antagonist who did not recognize class or any other distinctions among his intended victims. For black women, this discourse was likewise useful as a vehicle for claims to civil and social legitimacy based on its conception of black womanhood. Whether or not they saw themselves as potential victims in need of protection, black women recognized and supported the ideological stance of New Negro manhood, especially as it concerned self defense.

Washington and the War

In the month before the U.S. declaration of war, the First Separate Battalion (Colored) of the Washington, D.C. National Guard was called into service. Though they had returned from border duty in Texas just days before, they made record time reporting for duty.¹³¹ These troops were assigned to guard federal buildings – including the White House, the Capitol, and the Treasury – around the capital, as well as bridges and water supply facilities. Their visibility in this role was a point of pride for the city's African Americans, who pointed to them as evidence of the patriotism and manhood of the

¹³⁰ Lewis, *D.C.*, 74.

¹³¹ *Washington Post* 3/13/1917.

race.¹³² Some whites comforted themselves with the rationale that they were thus deployed because their skin color made them impossible for white skinned Germans to infiltrate.

As soon as Congress declared war, citizens began streaming in to the capital. Between April and October 1917, the city's population of 350,000 expanded by 40,000. A year later the city held some 525,000 residents. In these two years the federal civilian workforce tripled.¹³³ Not surprisingly, the pressure on housing facilities and city services like sanitation and transportation was tremendous. It was also impossible to meet. Temporary stucco structures went up "almost overnight" on the Mall and in other open spaces, to be used for both housing and office space. For the duration of the war, the city was "dominated by a single overwhelming purpose—the successful prosecution of the war."¹³⁴

Other essential services, policing in particular, had already been strained due to the reluctance of Congress to allocate adequate funds to the municipality. This reluctance seems to have been based on the city's continuing status as a kind of political football. In 1916, policemen in D.C. were paid about half of what men could get in the trades. The force had for years operated with numbers far below the authorized amount, and with the city's population so expanded, the police were severely outnumbered. Editorials in the dailies harped on this fact according to their own agendas: depending on where you stood, the force deserved more funding in order to pay its noble men what they deserved, or its paltry numbers were a further demonstration of its ineffectuality. In 1919 a move to unionize the District police force (echoing similar efforts in over 30 cities nationwide)

¹³² Barbeau and Henri, *Unknown Soldiers*, 19-20.

¹³³ Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 120.

¹³⁴ WPA Guide, 46.

would be quashed by threats from the president and the Secretary of War to replace the police with soldiers. In fact a number of politicians and editorialists called for the militarization of the capital's law enforcement, on grounds either that the city's force was inefficient or just too small.¹³⁵

Even as the federal city's police force was undersized and poorly funded, the federal policing apparatus was in the process of a significant expansion. During the war, in response to the threat of German espionage, the Justice Department built a substantial force of agents and bureaucrats. In fact, many of those war workers who poured into the city after US entry into the war were engaged in work related to the investigation, registration, internment, and general monitoring and control of "alien enemies."¹³⁶ This work was the means for the quick ascension of J. Edgar Hoover, who was just 25 in 1919 but already in charge of the Department's "all-out attack on radicalism" – i.e. bolshevism and anarchism – which replaced the pursuit of suspected German spies even before Armistice.¹³⁷

Richard Powers says in his biography of the capital's native son Hoover that "Washington was, as it still is, a company town, and the company was the federal government."¹³⁸ The white city was comprised in large part of civil servants, many of them, like Hoover's family, entrenched for several generations. Powers describes an early twentieth century white middle class which in the interests of self-preservation actively avoided political involvement or activism.

¹³⁵ Green, *Secret City*, 196; Waskow, *Race Riot to Sit-in*, 7

¹³⁶ Richard Gid Powers, *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 50-51. An "alien enemy was a person whose country of origin was one with which the United States was at war—not necessarily a spy or agent of such a country, but simply someone who had been born there."

¹³⁷ Powers, *Secrecy and Power*, 63; Kornweibel, *Seeing Red*, 5.

¹³⁸ Powers, 36.

In the early 1900s the city's public schools were known for academic excellence on both sides of the color line. While black schools drew students and teachers from around the country, the city's white schools attracted students from surrounding suburbs. Powers describes Hoover's alma mater, Central High, as a training ground for the capital's white upper crust, and he makes a strong case for his contention that the school's "exclusion of blacks seems to have been the principal factor in making Central High's students feel as if they were an elite." The school

was an important symbol of the fact (or illusion) that a white skin was the only passport needed for admission into the privileged ranks of Washington's elite (and, by extension, into the national elite as well). Like the churches and the government bureaucracy, Central High was one of the white middle class's weapons in its drive to cultural, social, economic, and political power. At the turn of the century it was a palpable expression and vehicle of Seward Square's [a typical middle class neighborhood, a few blocks southeast of the Capitol, where Hoover was born and raised] sense of moral and racial caste. That, in turn, was sustained largely by the exclusion of blacks.¹³⁹

What Powers leaves out here, of course, is class differences and even conflict; not all the city's whites were middle-class civil servants. A substantial portion of them were working class, whether employed by the government or not. In addition, the upper classes – elected and appointed officials and their families as well as a more permanent social elite – must also be reckoned with in considering the city's social and political dynamics. Powers' use of the term "elite" is somewhat troublesome here since he seems to be replicating the self-definition "(or illusion)" – or aspirations – of middle-class white Washingtonians rather than analyzing their actual relative position.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 27-28.

In describing the city's white middle class, Powers asserts that "Seward Square knew what it was and what it was not, and the symbol of all it was not was the radical foreigner."¹⁴⁰ This is of course the expression of a typical middle class, native-born American attitude, but in a city with few foreign immigrants, this form of negative identification was also conveniently consistent with the segregationist mentality. The fear that black Americans were vulnerable to German or bolshevist propaganda was at once a kind of sub rosa admission that blacks were mistreated and might reasonably be open to alternatives, and a disingenuous effort to paint them as dangerous for reasons beyond those already widely employed.¹⁴¹ They were now potentially subversive on a larger scale. Evidence for this fear lies in the fact that Washington's relative paucity of immigrants did not prevent a widespread wartime reaction against the "alien threat" within the capital both during and after the war. The city's American Legion, Knights of Columbus, and Home Defense League all stood as testament of white citizens' readiness to face subversive dangers on the homefront, and the white dailies regularly carried headlines warning of "bolshevism among the negroes," notwithstanding the certainty of even such a red-baiter as Attorney General Palmer that African Americans were not vulnerable to bolshevism.¹⁴²

In Washington, the fears of labor activism, foreign subversion, and racial tension collided in a number of interesting ways. In June of 1918 the black military intelligence operative Major Walter H. Loving made a report to his chief on the subject of "Conditions Among Colored People of the District" wherein he responded to concern among "higher authorities" regarding "a feeling of unrest among the colored people of

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 33.

¹⁴¹ See Ellis, 10-11.

¹⁴² "No Bolshevism in Racial Riots," *Atlanta Constitution* 7/31/19.

this city.” The city’s African Americans were upset at rumors that a local regiment of black troops “had been all cut to pieces in France.” Loving reported that he had denied the rumors in the black press and sent men from house to house to refute them; combined with actual word from soldiers overseas, his efforts were successful.

Having explained the immediate, logical reasons for this “feeling of unrest,”

Loving goes on to address another point of white concern.

The air of independence of the servants in these days seem to greatly alarm the white people of the District, and they take it to be possible German propaganda, but it is a mistake. It is the servants’ propaganda. The truth is that these servants know that the demand for help is much greater than the supply and they are taking the advantage of the opportunity. They demand certain days and hours off, set the time you must have breakfast and dinner, and almost limit you to the number of diners. I visited a certain Cafe the other day and talked freely with the waitresses and cook. The cook told me that she would not cook for any white person for less than seventy-five dollars a month. I asked her why, and she replied that cooks were hard to get and she could get a job anywhere. I mention this in order to show you that the arrogance on the part of the servants may not be taken as German propaganda, but as a feeling of their own importance to the household.

As ever, Loving dismisses the fantastical explanations for black servants’ “arrogance” and offers more feasible reasons which work to rationalize African Americans and their behavior. He notes that many of the “washerwomen, cooks and maids employed in the District” had grammar school or higher educations and had been able to pass examinations for war work “when the doors of the departments were thrown open to them.” This left the employment pool for domestic work smaller and the market tighter. The members of that pool were aware of the fact, and exploiting it. He does note further the city’s weathering without incident racially charged events such as the hanging of 13

black soldiers in Texas the previous December: “I do not think that there could be a more trying time in this city...and if nothing resulted from that incident, I feel confident that we have the situation well in hand, and the government is needlessly alarmed.”¹⁴³

Loving ends his report with an acknowledgement that

there are many little things arising from time to time which are quickly laid to rest which I do not think worthy of mention in my reports, but as a whole, the colored people of this city and all over the United States are loyal and can be depended upon to respond to the Nation’s call.¹⁴⁴

As the Military Intelligence Division’s “best black operative” (according to historian Theodore Kornweibel), Major Loving investigated and surveilled all kinds of black political actions and activists. He seems to have walked a thin line in many situations. As we see from the above, in this kind of investigation his primary concern seems to be in allaying his white superiors’ fears, but there is also advocacy. He is dismissive, however respectfully, of the idea of German propaganda having any reach into the black community, and his allusion to the hanging of the infantrymen carries a hint that if there had been trouble as a result of it, such trouble would have been justified. Kornweibel calls Loving “dependably conservative,” but notes that in the process of his investigation of black outrage at the postwar lynching of five African Americans (one of whom was a uniformed soldier) he made “an anguished plea for the punishment of the guilty parties...[warning] MID that blacks would be satisfied only by meaningful protection of their basic rights.”¹⁴⁵ Like many African American leaders, Loving was relatively

¹⁴³ The 13 were executed in December of 1917 after being court-martialed along with a number of their regiment after a series of violent clashes with white mobs in Houston; most analysts agree that their actions were at least in part provoked by the massacre of East St. Louis. See Chapter 1; also Haywood, Slotkin, Barbeau and Henri.

¹⁴⁴ Loving to Chief, MIB, 6/30/1918. MID papers, NA, RG 165.

¹⁴⁵ Kornweibel, *Seeing Red*, 79.

unconcerned about the lure of bolshevism *per se* for blacks; his focus was on the dangers created by sustained injustice and violence.¹⁴⁶

After the War

There had been widespread discussion amongst African Americans as to whether or not they ought to volunteer for the military effort, and many of those who decided it was the right thing to do came to that decision because they believed it would once again demonstrate their worthiness and ability as citizens, their manhood and their patriotism. The scandal of the Linard memo (which appeared along with similar documents in the May 1919 issue of *Crisis*) combined with stories of brutal maltreatment at the hands of U.S. officers and soldiers, and lay in stark contrast to the treatment black American soldiers generally received from the French.¹⁴⁷ African American soldiers and civilians were determined that wartime service would contribute to meaningful change for black citizens in the U.S. The soldiers were not, however, welcomed back by white America as they and their communities had expected – in fact, quite the opposite. Black men were insulted, threatened, and on a number of occasions lynched for nothing more than wearing the uniform of the U.S. military.¹⁴⁸ The outrage and determination such attacks inspired among African Americans was a key factor in the surge of black political and social defiance that followed the war.¹⁴⁹

With the end of overseas hostilities, the intense nativist hysteria of wartime steadily metamorphosed into the first Red Scare. Indeed, some scholars argue that the

¹⁴⁶ For more on Loving, see Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

¹⁴⁷ “Secret Information Concerning Black American Troops,” August 7, 1918; “Replacement of Colored Officers by White Officers,” August 24, 1918, both memos reprinted in Wilson, ed., *The Crisis Reader*, 350-353; Barbeau and Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: Black American Troops in World War I*. For more on this, see Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

¹⁴⁸ Dray, *Persons Unknown*, 247-48.

¹⁴⁹ See Chapter 1 for more detailed discussion.

transition was altogether seamless.¹⁵⁰ Longstanding discomfort among many Americans with socialism and socialists – who were often depicted as suspicious, racially distinct foreigners – was fed by intemperate newspaper headlines and politicians’ rhetoric. A post-war wave of revolutionary activity in Europe in the wake of the Bolshevik triumph seemed deeply threatening. At the same time, over four million people in the U.S. participated in nearly 3,500 strikes and lockouts in 1919 alone, and even though on the whole American workers were not socialists, their activism in this period was an easy target for red-baiting bosses and publishers.¹⁵¹ Stories of strikers’ destructive and subversive activities combined with a frenzied characterization of them as bolshevists to serve multiple purposes: discrediting workers’ demands, feeding the hysterical fear of communism, and chilling dissenting voices in multiple arenas.

The surge in labor activism immediately following Armistice was centrally connected to government action: “with few controls and little planning, armies dispersed, wartime regulations expired, and industries either shut down or ... [retooled] for peacetime consumption.” Thousands of men were summarily demobilized from the military just as government agencies cancelled war contracts; veterans poured into the labor market just as it shriveled to nothing. The labor strife was also the culmination of a longstanding and mounting hostility between labor and management exploding with the coming of peace. The already inevitable conflict was exacerbated by postwar economic conditions and some say also by the determination on either side to settle once and for all the power dynamics of the relationship. Add in the political and commercial interests of certain political forces and newspaper publishers and we see a number of extremely

¹⁵⁰ Tuttle, *Race Riot*, 17; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 223.

¹⁵¹ “Strikes and Lockouts in the United States, 1916 to 1920,” *Monthly Labor Review*, June 1921, 166-67.

incompatible forces pulling in different directions all at the same time, creating a highly combustible situation, a mix that could neither find nor hold equilibrium.

During the war, workers had gained from the national government, provisionally, the right to collectively bargain. The Wilson administration created the National War Labor Board, which recognized the American Federation of Labor (AFL) as the representative of labor, but “the price was the unconditional support of organized labor to the government and the war effort.”¹⁵² Once the war was over, management was determined to undo that arrangement and to lock in once and for all the open shop. Union membership had grown tremendously – the AFL doubled in four years. At the same time the war had fueled industry and strengthened the capitalist class, even as wartime exigencies provided greater employment opportunity to African Americans and other marginal groups.¹⁵³

Labor militance fed into the anticommunist hysteria that was replacing wartime anti-Germanism and nativism. The syndicalist International Workers of the World (IWW) was under intense attack by both federal and local authorities, wherever it was active, and was painted by newspapers as seeking the destruction not just of property and labor relations, but of the entire social order. State as well as private entities looked to the Red Menace to justify their continued power, existence and energy, in their own estimation as well as in the public eye. Many people looked on the news from Russia with trepidation, and they feared the hope and activism which that same news inspired in some of their compatriots. The threat was made real in the opening months of the year by

¹⁵² Regin Schmidt, *Red Scare: FBI and the Origins of Anticommunism in the United States, 1919-1943* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2000), 70.

¹⁵³ Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1955), Chapter 7.

a rash of some thirty bombings, only a few successful in causing harm or damage. Of the latter, one destroyed a portion of Attorney General Palmer's Washington home.

With the end of the war, thousands of troops were summarily decommissioned just as industrial output abruptly slowed and in many cases stopped dead. Men who had served abroad were home and in need of work, inflation was precipitous, and housing was extremely tight in many big cities. Black men who had fought in World War I returned from combat determined to enjoy the full citizenship they felt they had earned through their service. Other members of their communities, male and female, were equally resolved.

Conclusion: Prelude to a Riot

The capital at the turn of the century was a city in transition. The real "White City" was finally under construction, as the early republican vision of the city melded with the contemporary philosophy of elevation through landscaping and architecture into the ultimate expression of national superiority. At the same time, in mostly unchanged residential areas, stolid row houses and stately homes built on squares surrounded squalor and deprivation within interior alleys. The gaping wound of extreme poverty and its attendant troubles was literally in the back yards of the city's residents, black and white, and because of the city's growth rate, the problem seemed unsolvable.

With the country's entry to the Great War, the official city's ambitious reconstruction halted. Temporary office and living spaces were constructed around the downtown area, even right on the Mall, obstructing the landscapers' long views and sullyng the classical temples with their temporary and unsightly but necessary bulk. The city was suddenly under new pressures of all kinds, in its official as well as mundane

capacities, and rather than subsiding, many of the old pressures were further exacerbated. Though there were calls from leaders on both sides of the color line for citizens to come together as Americans and leave racial and other differences aside, the war effort failed to eradicate racial tension and mistrust. To the contrary, in the capital racial tension was heightened, since many of the city's new white inhabitants were unaccustomed to the city's style of interracial living.

At the end of the war, the pressure failed to subside. Invasion was still a great fear, only now the subversive was Red rather than German. The fear of alien enemies turned in on itself to become the fear of the enemy within. Government agencies and practices that had emerged during the war in response to the German threat transformed into more permanent structures designed to protect the nation from an internal danger that would prove exceedingly long-lived. And though different, the new menace was certainly not insignificant – if anything, it was the opposite. No less than the Germans, the bolsheviks and anarchists would apparently blow you up in your bed, and they were dedicated to the destruction of the country on a moral as well as physical level.

Meantime, racial tension grew. As William Tuttle puts it in his study of the Chicago riot, “It seemed, in fact, that the atmosphere during the first year of peace after World War I was even more conducive to racial violence than during the war itself.”¹⁵⁴ In short, multiple factors fed the fire that exploded in the nation's capital in July. For months following the end of the war, and especially after the new year began, the city's white papers carried increasingly hysterical headlines and stories referring to a “negro crime wave” in the city. Many of the “crimes” were described as attacks upon white

¹⁵⁴ Tuttle, *Race Riot*, 13-14

women. Though the stories frequently failed to live up to their headlines, there was a widespread perception that the city was teetering on the edge of chaos.

Some of the stories in white papers blamed “red” propaganda for the “unrest” among the city’s blacks, who scoffed at the idea that bolshevism was an issue and pointed to what they saw as the real problem: racial inequity and violence. The *Bee* and the Baltimore *Afro-American* complained of the irresponsibility of white papers, decried criminality on both sides of the color line, and carried their own reports of white men harassing and menacing black women. The *Bee* in particular complained frequently of white mistreatment of “respectable Negroes,” and of the ignorance of whites who were new to the city. “The white people in this city are not discriminating enough. Those who have lived in this city for years know that the respectable class of colored citizens are just as law-abiding as the respectable class of white citizens....”¹⁵⁵

At the same time, the idea of a “Negro Crime Wave” further played on white anxieties. Statistically, though crime did surge along with the city’s numbers, the racial breakdown of those charged actually shows a slight drop in the numbers of black suspects.¹⁵⁶ This is not surprising, since most of the newcomers to the city were white. Essentially, the crime rate and its demographic breakdown seem to have stayed the same, once other changes are taken into account. The idea of a crime wave however, and its attribution to black men, was a crucial expression of the tension building in the city with the loss of focus on war. Crime was matched only by political subversion (bolshevism,

¹⁵⁵ “Not to Blame,” editorial, *Washington Bee* (WB) 7/26/19, 4.

¹⁵⁶ Lloyd Abernethy, “The Washington Race War of July, 1919” *Maryland Historical Magazine*, vol 58 no. 4 (December 1963), 312-13; *Annual Report of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, 1919*, 188-89.

anarchism), and complicated international political negotiations as a favorite topic of the daily papers.¹⁵⁷

On both sides of the color line people complained of the “new type” that had invaded the city. Added to an already overcrowded city full of war workers who probably feared their work was imminently to end if it had not already done so, was a new and dangerous “element”: the soldiers, some still enlisted, many recently decommissioned, all young, transient men, possibly traumatized by war and certainly at loose ends. For whatever reasons, many of those who had been stationed in or near the capital chose not to head home, and instead hung around.¹⁵⁸ There was neither space nor work for them, but something, perhaps each other, their female counterparts among the war workers, or the energy of the crowded, purposeful city, kept them there.

Fights regularly broke out on the crowded streets, and citizens on both sides of the color line complained of daily insult and animosity. Black and white newspapers alike carried often-shrill stories of such incidents, and (surely with at least one eye on sales) warned of mounting dangers. Black Washingtonians worried that the ghost of East St. Louis was lurking among the white soldiers, ready to be set off by one more newspaper report. They were determined that if that ghost should rise, the outcome in their city would be very different. Whites too were resolute in their intention to gain control of a city they saw as teetering on the edge of a great danger.

Carl Abbott observes that everything about Washington is “‘political’ in either a narrow or broad sense.”¹⁵⁹ Like other major events in that city, the Red Summer riot in the nation’s capital was an expression of a powerful current in the national scene. In its

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.; also, Green, *Secret City*.

¹⁵⁸ Abernethy, “Race War,” 311-12; *Washington Times*, 7/17/1919, 7/18/1919.

¹⁵⁹ Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 7.

causes, its trajectory, and in what the city's inhabitants (and their compatriots) made of it, this riot articulated the political and social state of the nation in 1919.

CHAPTER THREE

“Race War At Capital”¹: The Red Summer Riot in D.C

One of the most brutal forms of oppression is the punishment of a whole race for the crimes of individuals. For many years this has been, and it still is, the practice in American States that do not recognize the citizenship of the Negro. To accuse a black man is to condemn him to torture and death, and resentment on the part of kindred is held to justify massacres that are complacently dignified as race wars.

What we see now in Washington is more properly to be thus classified than any other disturbance that we have had, and there is a reason for it worthy of serious consideration. Negroes are taking part in the hostilities. If they are assaulted or shot, they are assaulting and shooting in return. In defense of life, limb and liberty they are meeting mobs with mobs.

Deplorable as all this lawlessness is, the response of the black man to the white man was bound to come some time.²

The Washington, D.C. riot of 1919 was the result of a haunting. The citizens of Washington, like all Americans, lived with the specter of racial violence and were harried by its extreme manifestation. Lynching was a metonym, describing the nation’s historical and continuing identification with black subordination in its most acute and horrific form. Hysterical headlines in white papers; urgent calls for self defense in black papers; popular culture; folklore: all were woven together with a central thread. With one eruption after another, each different in the specifics but all reverberating with a common note, the summer of 1919 was a moment of intense confrontation with a bloody ghost. The capital’s “race war” was in some ways the most visible of these encounters, because of the city’s role as emblem of the nation.

¹ Headline, *New York Times*, 7/21/1919.

² “Our Own Subject Race,” editorial, *New York World*, 7/23/1919. Reprinted in the *Washington Bee*, 7/26/1919.

Washington, D.C., situated on a former swamp, is generally hot and muggy in July, and 1919 was no exception. The city was steamy, overcrowded, and tense. Temporary buildings congested the National Mall, housing stock was bursting at the seams, and people worried about losing their wartime jobs. Young white men in uniform, some still enlisted and others recently discharged, thronged the streets and filled the streetcars. The daily papers were filled with stories of overseas revolutions and treaty negotiations, domestic labor troubles, the bolshevik menace at home and abroad, anarchist bombings, and in the capital a “negro crime wave.” Black Washingtonians complained of street harassment by military men and did not need their threats in order to remember the massacre of blacks in East St. Louis just two years before. They promised themselves and each other that it would not be replicated in the capital. Local African American leaders sent a letter to the city’s four white dailies on July 9, “calling their attention to the fact that they were sowing the seeds of a race riot by their inflammatory headlines.”³

Tension in the capital was fed by ominous stories of fighting between the races in Charleston, Philadelphia, Bisbee (Arizona), and on July 10th in Longview, Texas, where an economic dispute between the Negro Business League and white merchants resulted in a lynching. Subsequent black protests in turn led to a near massacre. The whole business ended only with the declaration of martial law.⁴ African Americans read accounts of these events in white daily papers, and then saw alternative retellings in black publications like the weekly *Chicago Defender*. They were well aware of the dual role – provocative and obscurantist – white papers frequently played in race troubles, and

³ “Letter to Members,” District of Columbia Branch, NAACP, 7/23/19. NAACP Archives, D.C. Branch Files, Library of Congress.

⁴ Tuttle, *Race Riot*, 25-29.

prepared themselves to face a storm. Some bought guns, others declared their intention to do so.

On Friday night, July 18, a young white woman on her way home from work at the Engraving Bureau was approached by two black men. According to her story,

One of them...snatched at an umbrella she was carrying over her shoulder, and when she wrested this from him seized her by the arm and pushed her against his companion, who, in turn, jostled her. Frightened at her resistance to their insulting actions, the pair fled.⁵

Some white men who were nearby chased after the would-be umbrella thieves, but failed to catch them. A police detective was unable to trace them. Major Raymond Pullman, the chief of police, ordered officers around the city to question any young men, white or black, whom they found after dark in “isolated or suspicious parts of the city” and arrest any whose answers were “unsatisfactory.”⁶ In taking such action, the chief showed that he was aware that his city was a tinderbox but his effort at prevention failed. The spark had already ignited and it would burn for days.

In Saturday’s *Washington Post* the story appeared under the headline “NEGROES ATTACK GIRL.” Other dailies conformed, and that afternoon a mob of soldiers, sailors, and marines gathered near the Capitol, determined to avenge the attack. Members of the mob were further infuriated by a mistaken report that the victim, Elsie Williams, was the wife of a military man. Over the course of the next four days, white mobs numbering up to two thousand (and comprised of both civilians and men in military uniforms) ranged through the downtown area surrounding the National Mall, chasing and beating any black men they encountered. In daily papers, the city’s police force appeared hapless,

⁵ “Negroes Attack Girl,” *Washington Post* (hereafter WP) 7/19/19.

⁶ *Ibid.*

outnumbered, and not always particularly concerned to stop the violence. A small group of military cavalry, the Provost Guard, which had until a few months before been deployed as a supplement to the Municipal Police, was brought back in, and helped restrict the largest of the mobs to the downtown area around the Mall.

Serious but smaller scale fights also broke out beginning on Sunday evening in various parts of the city, most of them in the primarily black areas northwest of the Capitol. These confrontations frequently involved gunplay, as armed African Americans patrolled their neighborhoods on foot and in cars, shooting at white men (including at times police) who ventured too near. Both blacks and whites barricaded themselves inside their homes, shooting through windows when they felt threatened. There were dozens of confrontations on streetcars, several of them deadly. Black passengers were beaten, pulled or chased off cars, threatened with death. There were also instances of black men shooting at white crowds or individuals from streetcar windows or doors.

On Monday night the violence reached its height, and by Tuesday night it began to subside, although there were some serious incidents that afternoon and evening. A heavy rain and the presence of some two thousand troops under the command of an army general helped clear the streets. By Wednesday the fighting was all but over, and the city settled into an edgy peace. Six men were dead, several hundred people injured. Hospitals were overrun with white and black victims, and the courts and jails had been hectic since Saturday night. There was relatively little property damage, thanks in part to the fact that the large mob was restricted to the Mall, and smaller groups of marauders were generally held off by gunfire.

It is not a stretch to infer that the nation's capital was particularly affected by the war, because so many of its residents were involved in war work of various kinds, and so many others were soldiers, veterans, or their families. Given the city's primary purpose, inhabitants of the capital had a reasonable fear of German sabotage during the war, and postwar bombings such as that which destroyed part of the Attorney General's home kept many nervous. The fear of an internal enemy so obviously expressed in the Red Scare and the intense nativism of the time was an easy cognate for older, guilt-based white fears of African Americans (most recently as a violently oppressed subordinate minority) that had always transmuted fairly readily into savage violence.⁷ At the same time, the treatment and experience of black soldiers abroad had provoked increasingly defiant political and social attitudes among African Americans at home, soldiers and civilians alike. In a feedback loop, this growing black assertiveness fed white anxieties, hostility, and violence, which in turn validated and reinforced the anger and determination of African Americans.

The narrative which follows attempts to trace and describe the trajectory of the riot, as an event but also as a story, or series of stories. It necessarily arises from a multiplicity of accounts and explanations, most gleaned from daily papers, which – like most other sources – were openly biased. The various accounts reveal as much through language, assumptions, and implications as they do outright. Therefore my narrative will attend closely to those latter aspects in order to make better sense of what happened, and most importantly, to understand more about what people made of it at the time.

Saturday, July 19

⁷ For more on “internal enemy” see Tuttle, *Race Riot*, Ch. 1; Robert Murray, *Red Scare*. For racial violence as expression of guilt and fear, see Ellis, Joel Williamson, Hodes, Ayers. For some discussion of connections between nativism and racism, see John Higham, Omi and Winant.

Elsie Williams (a.k.a. Stephnick), whose umbrella was nearly stolen Friday night, was married to a civilian employee of the Naval Aviation Bureau. Some newspaper accounts of the “attack” reported (in error) that he was a naval aviator; the insult to his wife was seen as the breaking point for the soldiers, sailors, and marines whose anger had been fed for weeks by crime wave stories in the daily press. Scores of them gathered near the Mall, intent on revenge for this insult to a brother serviceman.

The streets were swarming with men on leave for the weekend, along with others recently demobilized and at loose ends, many still in uniform.⁸ Through these crowds spread a telephone game distortion of the original misstatement. In one variation on the story, reported days later by an agent of the Military Intelligence Division (MID) of the War Department, the riot started because “a soldier’s wife was assaulted and her pocket book snatched by a negro.” It is important to understand that in the widely understood parlance of the time, “assault” or “attack” on a woman was generally known as code for “rape,” especially if the “attacker” was a black man.⁹ The MID investigator attributed the formation of the mob to the victim’s husband gathering men “for the purpose of cleaning up the negroes,” but he put it on Sunday the 20th rather than on Saturday, apparently blending two days into one.¹⁰ In any case, word went out among white men to meet at the Knights of Columbus hut on the corner of Seventh and Pennsylvania SE, just a few blocks away from the Capitol and not far from the Marine Barracks.

Perhaps two hundred men set out from that meeting point toward the “colored district” nearby, looking for a suspect just released from police custody. This was

⁸ Abernethy, “Race War,” 315.

⁹ Lisa Lindquist Dorr, *White Women, Rape, and the Power of Race in Virginia, 1900-1960* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 56. See also, “Attacks on White Women,” editorial, *Chicago Defender*, 9/20/19, 20.

¹⁰ Dawson report 7/22/19, Negro subversion file, RG 165, National Archives.

apparently John Colle, who had an “unimpeachable alibi” and no evidence against him.¹¹ As the men moved through the streets toward Colle’s house, their numbers grew, and they assaulted any black man they could catch. By the time the police became aware of what was happening, two African American men were seriously hurt, having been beaten with lead pipes and clubs, and a number of others were also injured.¹²

According to one source, the mob’s first victim was a man named Charles Rawls, who was walking in the street with his wife. He was hit in the face by one attacker, and then struck with a club by another. A third fired a shot at him, “which went wild.” Rawls and his wife were able to run away and the mob continued on to Colle’s house. Along the way they fractured the skull of George Montgomery. By the time they arrived at Colle’s house, the police were there and he was protected.¹³ By this time though, the mob was solidly established, and proceeded to range through the area around the Capitol, chasing and beating whomever they could for hours.

Around midnight, most of the serious fighting subsided, as the white mobs dissipated. Early Sunday morning a white policeman in the southwest was shot and seriously wounded when he “challenged a frightened negro,” as the *Washington Times* put it.¹⁴ In the first day or two of fighting white papers tended to depict black citizens as terrified and helpless victims – even when they were fighting back. That perspective would soon shift, or at least be expanded. This shooting indicates that as early as Saturday night black Washingtonians were mistrustful of the police, and that some were

¹¹ Damon P. Young, “Negro-White Contact in Washington,” (Master’s Thesis, Howard University, 1926), 135. MSRC, Call no. M378.2425 Y84 1926.

¹² “Scores are Injured in More Race Riots,” *Washington Post* (hereafter WP), 7/21; *Herald* 7/20, cited in Abernethy, 316.

¹³ Young, “Negro-White Contact,” 135-36.

¹⁴ *Washington Times* 7/20, cited in Abernethy, “Race War,” 316.

already armed and ready to shoot. It seems also to show how seriously African Americans in D.C. took the repeated warnings and exhortations about preventing in their city a recurrence of the tragedy of East St. Louis.

Sunday, July 20

On Sunday, fighting didn't break out until the evening, but news of the previous night's events was out: Boston and New York papers carried stories about servicemen rioting in the capital in retaliation for attacks on white women.¹⁵ Washingtonians seem to have been active in spreading word and making preparations for what might come. Despite calls on them to take action, government officials other than the city police did nothing on Sunday.¹⁶ In contrast with public officials, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was already galvanized. The Association, which had a large and influential branch in the Capital, saw events like the mob action in D.C. in direct relation to the national lynching epidemic; both were major organizational priorities. Indeed, in one letter to members in 1917 following East St. Louis, James Weldon Johnson warned that "mob-violence" was "in many respects a greater danger" than lynching.¹⁷

According to a report it sent out to members on Wednesday the 23rd, the District branch of the NAACP was in motion immediately on Sunday morning, sending a letter to Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels "asking that he take action to restrain the sailors and marines who, according to the newspapers, were responsible for Saturday night's disturbances." The letter also alluded to an ongoing investigation of the clash in

¹⁵ "Race Riot at Capital," *NY Times* (hereafter NYT); "Service Men in Race Riot at Washington," *Boston Daily Globe* (hereafter BDG).

¹⁶ Waskow, *Race Riot to Sit-in*, 24.

¹⁷ James W. Johnson, "Letter to Members," 9/24/1917, Grimke NAACP Correspondence, box 39-26, folder 539, MSRC.

Charleston, asserting, “The way to avoid a more serious clash here [in. D.C.] is to take drastic action with reference to the one of last night.”¹⁸ The letter received no response, which is unsurprising given Daniels’ racial attitude, which was in line with the Wilson administration as a whole.¹⁹

The NAACP’s assiduity as well as its insistence on holding high officials responsible was a hallmark of its practice in this period, and in particular of its response to the riots of 1919, on the local as well as national level. The Association’s archives show that officers at the national headquarters in New York went to work immediately upon hearing about events in the capital. Publicity Secretary Herbert Seligmann and Field Secretary James Weldon Johnson went down to Washington on Monday and Tuesday, respectively, to meet with government officials as well as local African American leaders and groups. The national organization and local constituents alike saw the NAACP’s role as both investigative and prosecutorial, since members did not have faith in the will of the justice system to find out and punish wrongdoers when they acted against blacks or their interests. Likewise, members looked to the organization as a more reliable source of information about events than the white press. So it was crucial that Seligmann and Johnson, national officers of the organization, go to Washington, for the sake of both action and information.

The streets were relatively quiet Sunday until about ten in the evening, when “Pennsylvania avenue, scene of inaugural and triumphal processions,...was turned into an arena over which hung the sinister spirit of race riot.” Fighting went on for hours along the Avenue in the northwest from Seventh Street to Fifteenth Street, both “free-for-

¹⁸ “Report to Members, July 23”, NAACP papers, G34, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

¹⁹ Waskow, 24; and see Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

all and individual combats” between white and black men, who “with seeming willingness threw themselves into a dozen of melees.” The police and their small Provost Guard supplement were “practically helpless...[and] did little more than stand while the fighting was going on.”²⁰ Despite the language of combat and melee, the *Post*’s coverage of Sunday night’s rioting generally depicted black men as victims rather than combatants. Dragged off streetcars, chased and beaten by the crowd of soldiers, sailors and marines, never themselves menacing, they were faceless, helpless. Though police said there were probably a hundred people injured, the paper specifically reported only black injuries.

The “spark...[that] set off the powder train” that night was the arrest of an African American man, Isaac Payne, on a “minor charge.” As the arresting officer waited with Payne at Ninth and Pennsylvania for transport to the precinct, “hundreds of men in khaki and blue and many negroes pressed into a close mass near the patrol box.” As the crowd grew, “remarks were passed, and soon blows were exchanged.” Payne was grabbed and beaten, until the police were able to break up the fracas. The *Post* says that with the arrival of the precinct wagon, and “[w]ith aid by cooler heads” Payne was rescued and the crowd dispersed, but not for long. Another fight soon broke out two blocks away, at Seventh Street and the Avenue, which resulted in the hospitalization of three black men for “lacerations of the head from fists and [clubs].”²¹

As often happens with these accounts, the contemporary reader is left wondering what has gone unreported. Who were the cooler heads? What was the temper of the black people in the crowd? How many of them were there? Were they there hoping to protect Payne, or were they silent witnesses? Like so many snapshots of the riot, this one evokes

²⁰ “Scores are Injured,” WP 7/21/1919.

²¹ Ibid.

for those familiar with it the history of lynchings and attempted lynchings, where blacks by their presence in some instances prevented escalation, and in others provoked it. In some lynchings, African Americans chose to watch the murder of their neighbors, sons, brothers, husbands and friends, in order to stand as witnesses of the crime, despite or perhaps because of their awareness that the murderers would not come to justice. On occasion they were forced to watch, in order to “learn the lesson.” In other cases, blacks were present strategically, in order to reassure whites that they too wanted to see “justice” done. Whether or not they believed a given lynching victim was guilty or deserving of this specific punishment, they chose in such instances to demonstrate assent, hoping in this way to prevent the spread of violence.²²

As the night went on fights continued to erupt in the street. The historian Carter G. Woodson, a professor at Howard, reported seeing a crowd of soldiers chasing a black man at Pennsylvania Avenue and Eighth Street as he made his way home. Ducking into a doorway until they passed, he continued on his way only to encounter yet another crowd in the midst of an attack, upon which he ran home.²³ Further down Pennsylvania Avenue, not far from the White House and in front of the Riggs Bank,

while throngs from the theaters passed by, Lawrence Johnson, a negro, was attacked while with two companions by several overseas marines. A soldier struck Johnson over the head with a stone carried in a handkerchief and a marine hit him with a club and stretched him on the pavement.

Johnson lay for more than 20 minutes before an ambulance could be diverted to the scene from Emergency Hospital’s many calls.²⁴

²² See Dray, Brundage, Williamson.

²³ Anacostia, 167.

²⁴ “Scores are Injured,” WP, 7/21/1919.

As with many of the paper's descriptions of specific incidents, the tone here is neutral, even clinical. Neither the black victim nor his assailants are characterized in any particular way, and the description lacks a starting point. A man walking with friends is attacked by a group of marines, apparently unprovoked. One of them hits him in the head with a stone carried in a handkerchief, another strikes him with a club. He lies on the pavement for 20 minutes – is he unconscious, bleeding, upset? Are his friends still fighting with the marines, have they run off to save themselves or get help? And what about the “thongs” from the theaters – are they stopping to watch? Do they participate in any way? Are there “cooler heads” among them who stop the beating once Johnson is laid out? The reporter tells us none of these things, though it would seem that anyone who saw as much as the article does describe would almost certainly have been able to answer the above questions as well. The violence of the event is defused by the coldness of the telling. This neutrality contrasts sharply with the previous day's headlines characterizing the Elsie Williams scuffle as an attack, and offering extensive details – physical descriptions of the assailants, the pursuit by white men, the failure of a “Headquarters detective” to turn up evidence.

All Sunday night, the downtown section was chaotic and volatile. Unsuspecting passersby of either race could be pulled into a fray at a moment's notice: “Here's one! some one would yell when the crowd saw a negro, and a chase would begin.” At one point the crowd broke into Child's restaurant with the intention of dragging out a black busboy. According to the *Post*, they “were only turned from their purpose by pleas of cooler heads that ‘too many ladies were present.’” The paper makes no mention of what

the busboy could have done to provoke the mob, or even to make it aware of his existence.²⁵

Over the course of the night, as the crowd grew more and more “contemptuous of authority,”²⁶ black men were chased and beaten in front of the White House and other government buildings.

At Fifteenth street the crowd ran past three policemen and chased a negro to the northeast corner of the Treasury building, where he was knocked down. A civilian said that he asked the three policemen at the Washington Hotel why someone did not stop the rioting, and one of the policemen replied:

“That is what we would like to know!”²⁷

From the beginning the police seem to have been overwhelmed. In the *Post* stories, there is a running theme of police haplessness and even ineptitude, though at times individual officers or small groups are portrayed as manly and even heroic. The inconsistencies were due at least in part to the fact that the publisher of the *Post* in this period, Ned McLean, was “bitterly antagonistic to the District of Columbia government and especially to the top command of the police force.” In fact, some of the energy behind the “crime wave” hysteria in the paper that summer came from McLean’s efforts to discredit the authorities.²⁸ As I have mentioned (see Chapter 2), the city’s police force had long been understaffed and underpaid; citizens and politicians as well as editorialists had been calling for amelioration in one form or another for years. The fact that the city’s police force was neither equipped nor altogether inclined to contain the violence is not unusual.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Abernethy, 316.

²⁷ “Scores,” WP, 7/21/1919.

²⁸ Waskow, 22, from Waskow’s 1959 interview with Commissioner Louis Brownlow. As I have mentioned (see Chapter 2, 49-50), the city’s police force had long been understaffed and underpaid; citizens and politicians as well as editorialists had been calling for amelioration in one form or another for years.

In East St. Louis, Chicago, and other white mob rampages, police didn't just stand by but actively participated in the violence. This was just one of the reasons that black people and organizations called on city authorities to hire more black policemen. In regard to Washington, Herbert Seligmann of the NAACP, among others, would later declare that the police were not helpless but rather unwilling to act on behalf of endangered black Washingtonians.²⁹

There were several instances of black men being pulled off streetcars and beaten on Sunday night, at least one of them after he yelled at the crowd from the car window. One young man wrote in a wavering hand the following statement for the NAACP:

I was on the 7th St. car between 7 and G Sts. Sunday about 11:15 July 20 1919 when a mob of sailors and soldiers jumped on the car and pulled me off beating [sic] me unmercifully from head to foot leaving me in such a condition that I could hardly crawl back home my condition now is that I am sore all over and can hardly walk. There were three other negroes two of which were women, who before I became unconscious, I could hear them pleading with the Lord to keep them from being killed.

This I am hardly able to write because of my condition. I am 17 years old but I am physically the size of a lad 13 years old.

Francis L. Thomas³⁰

Though his handwriting falters on the page, Thomas' language indicates a solid education and probable middle class background. Whether he provoked the men who beat him in any way beyond the simple fact of his skin color is impossible to know from his testimony. He may or may not have been yelling at the mob before he was beaten. His self-description as small for his age, possibly prompted by a lawyer, is clearly intended to elicit sympathy, though that does not make it untrue. His mention that the black women

²⁹ Herbert J. Seligmann, "Race War?" *New Republic* Vol XX, no. 249 (8/13/1919), 48.

³⁰ NAACP Paper, D.C. Branch files, G34.

on the car were praying aloud for their own lives instead of trying to intervene on his behalf could indicate a number of things, including his having actively provoked the attack and their consequent refusal to help him; an absence of “cooler” white heads on the car who might intervene to stop the rampage of the marines; and/or simply the savagery of the attack.

What we do know is that all sources reported multiple instances of streetcar-related confrontations, with the victims sometimes beaten in the car, sometimes pulled off and then beaten, and sometimes attacked as they were dismounting. There were also a number of shootings connected to the cars, with shooters either on moving cars or just dismounted at a stop. For the most part, it was African Americans who were assaulted, and whites who were shot at. This fact is emblematic of the riot as a whole: most of the shooters were apparently black, as were most of the beating victims.

Public transportation as a site of violence is one of the central images of the Washington riot, and this is characteristic of larger trends. The papers in the city, black and white, carried stories both before and after the riot about the streetcars as a frequent point of racial contention.³¹ They were certainly, in D.C. as other cities, one of the most common sites of interracial contact, and this factor easily combined with other kinds of tension to create conflict. As the city had become crowded, and as many of the newcomers were whites from the rural south, the streetcars had become fiercely contested public space – miniature jim crow battlegrounds. It is no wonder that so many of the riot’s incidents were connected to these mundane and yet symbolic flashpoints.³² In the

³¹ In fact, immediately following the riot a proposal for Jim Crow cars in the city was reintroduced and quickly defeated.

³² See Dorr on white women’s claims of fear of casual contact with black men, white male violence in response to claims related to such contact, and also for the complications of an urban context.

Wilson years the capital was increasingly less comfortable with the mixing of races, and the contention around the issue of segregated cars which had begun years before the riot heated up during the war as the city grew more crowded and difficult to navigate.³³

On Sunday evening, as the police struggled in vain to contain the rioting, Captain Doyle of the 8th Precinct, which lay in the northwest, received a visit from three African American men who lived in the area, Horace G. Anderson, Swan M. Kendrick, and George E.C. Hayes. Kendrick was at this time the Secretary of the District Branch of the NAACP. According to a report they made to the NAACP of their conversations with him and with Police Commissioner Brownlow the next day, these gentlemen went to the precinct house in order to aid the police. They had a suggestion for Captain Doyle, who appears to have been reasonably well trusted in the community. These men thought

that it would be a good thing for him, with two or three representative colored people of his district, to go out and talk to the crowds, assuring them that he, Captain Doyle, would use his men, both officers and marines, in the protection of the people from the mob....[T]his suggestion [was] taken advantage of and was carried out with success by Captain Doyle....³⁴

There are other reports of policemen touring certain black neighborhoods with local leaders and reassuring residents. Similar efforts do not appear to have been necessary in white neighborhoods. In the aftermath there were reports of black anger toward community leaders who had urged African Americans to “stay inside;” it is unclear

³³ See Chapter 2. For much more on this, see Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels*; Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*; Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race*.

³⁴ NAACP papers, D.C. Branch files, G34.

whether the efforts of Anderson, Kendrick, and Hayes would have been seen in the same way, since they were pushing at the police, at least as they describe it.³⁵

Though the men saw their efforts with Captain Doyle in the neighborhoods as a “success,” the same report goes on to describe a discouraging incident in the station house. While the black men were there “they saw unresisting colored prisoners brought in and beaten up...by the officers.” A separate document, apparently written by one of the three men, offers more detail:

While I was in conference with [Captain Doyle] in his private office which opened into the main room of the police station officers brought in a colored man and immediately knocked him down and proceeded to beat him, kicking him when he was down and cutting his head severely. My attention was attracted to this and I rushed into the other room followed by Captain Doyle. The man was on the floor surrounded by about 30 officers. I rushed through the crowd and standing over the man demanded that these officers treat him as a man and a human being. The man was then allowed to get to his feet. He was then removed to a cell. Going back into the captain’s office with him I told him that this was just the thing the people feared.³⁶

The three men asked that they be allowed to stay in the station house in order to prevent further mistreatment of black prisoners. The captain replied that they would have to be deputized by Commissioner Brownlow, whom they visited the following day. Their mission was fruitless. Neither they nor a number of other black leaders had any success in their calls for black deputies.

It is clear that in the days before the real fighting began police officials made some effort to prevent violence. Such endeavors could perhaps be seen as part of

³⁵ Neval Thomas to Archibald Grimke, misdated 6/28/1919. Archibald Grimke Papers, NAACP Correspondence, box 39-28, folder 561, MSRC

³⁶ NAACP papers, D.C. Branch files, G34

ongoing institutional attempts at professionalization, common in large cities in this period. But the actions and tendencies of the officers on the street reveal disparities, if not outright disagreement, between the majority of street officers and those in the upper ranks. This is borne out by Military Intelligence Division memoranda on the riot. One, dated July 22, 1919, observes,

...[T]here seems to be a feeling between Major Pullman and the policemen. Major Pullman does not seem to be very popular with his men. When his name is mentioned they all smile and refer to him as a Sunday School teacher, and at no time did your agents observe any laxness on the part of any member of the police force.³⁷

This both substantiates and contradicts a report written the next day by a different MID officer:

Admittedly the police force in Washington is inadequate and in a number of instances it has shown incompetency. If rumor is to be believed, many of the men on the force lack confidence in, and respect for, the Chief of Police.³⁸

The tension between Major Pullman and his men seems to have been a consequence of the chief's attempts at reforming his force. If his men lacked respect and confidence in him because they saw him as a "Sunday School teacher," the implication is that he wanted them to follow rules with which they didn't agree. This was a condition that predated the riot, of course. And it manifested in a particular way once the rioting started: Washington's white police refused or were unable to control a white mob and protect the city's black citizens.

³⁷ Dawson to Peters, MID, 7/22/19. Negro subversion file, 10218-350, RG 165, National Archives (NAACP).

³⁸ MID, Cutler memo to Director, 7/23/19. Negro Subversion file, 10218-350, RG 165, NA.

As Herbert Seligmann noted in a piece in *The New Republic* the following month,

It is hardly necessary to characterize the protection afforded Negroes by the Washington police.... on those first nights the police gave the impression both to Negroes and white men that they would be the allies of the white men. Although the aggressors were white mobbists led by white men in the uniform of the United States, ten Negroes were arrested for every white man arrested.³⁹

Black Washingtonians were worried not only that the police would fail to protect them, but that they would actively participate in the violence against them, as they had done in East St. Louis two years before, and as they would do in a few days in Chicago. It appears from reports in the black press that at least in some instances they were right to worry. And all the while, black ministers, lawyers, and businessmen were meeting with authorities, calling on them to do their jobs and see to it that black citizens would not be forced by the mobs to continue to protect themselves. It is perhaps likely, given the history and circumstances, that they knew it was a vain effort, but they undertook it nonetheless, perhaps to make a point.

On the other hand one might argue that the black men's attempts to rouse the police to action on their behalf connotes an expectation that the police would respond. It is difficult to tell from the tone of their public statements what the delegations actually expected; they speak in terms of what they believed was right – that the police should act to protect black people. But at the same time they warned that those people were ready to protect themselves, which might imply that most did not expect the police to take what they saw as proper action. In a private note, Neval Thomas, a prominent NAACP member, noted to Archibald Grimke that when he and other men “spoke our minds” in a meeting with the Commissioners and the police chief, the latter “four flushed’ and

³⁹ Seligmann, “Race War?” 48.

begged but we left saying ‘Very well if you can’t protect us we will arm and defend ourselves.’” This is essentially what the public notes also described, only leaving out the officials’ begging.⁴⁰ This description adds weight to the idea that the police failure was due at least in part to inability, as well as unwillingness to act. In any case, by all reports and for whichever reasons the police did little or nothing to prevent the violence of whites, and blacks were forced to fight or scare off the attackers themselves, if they could.

Military men were due to report to their barracks at midnight Sunday, their weekend leave over. The fighting continued, however, and there were general reports that a large number of men in uniform were present, although the *Post* claimed that servicemen had “deserted the highway after running things to suit themselves and chasing and beating negroes into a state of terror.”⁴¹ It seems clear that at least some or all of these uniformed men were among those recently discharged who had not left the city. They were not required to report to barracks, and not “amenable to army control,” according to a Military Intelligence report which also mentioned that “many of the men taking part in the riots were those on guard duty,” who had not been kept in camp.⁴²

After midnight there was a series of melees in the northwest, some blocks away from the Mall in mostly black neighborhoods. At one a.m. Police Headquarters got a call to Ninth Street and New York Avenue, N.W., where a mob of 250 was reportedly attacking African Americans at a streetcar transfer point. Five minutes later there was a riot call a few blocks away at 10th and L Streets; moments after that a report of soldiers attacking blacks near the American League baseball park; then at Seventh and

⁴⁰ Thomas to Grimke. Grimke Papers, NAACP Correspondence, box 39-28, folder 561.

⁴¹ “Scores,” WP 7/21/1919

⁴² “Negro Agitation,” Memo, 7/1/1919 [sic- maybe 7/31?], 10218-364, Glasser files, RG 60, NAACP.

Pennsylvania a mob threatened a policeman trying to arrest a soldier. Until at least three a.m. the white crowds continued their rampage, even beginning at some point to commandeering taxis (whose drivers seem to have been perfectly willing to help), jumping out to beat black pedestrians. The *Post* reports repeatedly note the mobs' "heedlessness" of police, further reinforcing doubts about the extent of the public servants' will to stop the violence. Fifteen African Americans were sent to Emergency Hospital that night; others less seriously hurt were escorted by law enforcement first to the police station and then home.⁴³

Police Commissioner Brownlow told Messrs. Anderson, Kendrick, and Hayes in a meeting the next day that on Sunday night

the white mob made fifteen (15) separate attempts to enter the section of the city north of K Street (This being a colored section) and were only repelled by the use of cavalry [sic]; and that eight (8) similar attempts to get into the southwest section (Also a colored section) [sic] were made and likewise repelled. He further said that most of the assaults and aggressions were made by white people, and that most of the gun play was on the part of the colored.⁴⁴

Though he notes in this conversation that black people have armed themselves, Brownlow does not credit this factor in his explanation of why the mob was repeatedly foiled. It was the cavalry, in his view, that prevented their incursions. According to the newspaper reports, some white attackers definitely broke out of the cordon, or made it into black neighborhoods from other directions, but it is clear that the cavalry did contain a large number within their cordon.

⁴³ Young, 137.

⁴⁴ "Brownlow Interview" (my title), NAACP papers, D.C. Branch files, G34.

African Americans credited their neighborhoods' safety to their own actions.

Indeed, in the same meeting with the police commissioner, regarding Sunday night

Mr. Anderson explained [to Brownlow] that the gun play on the part of the colored people was occasioned by the feeling that they had to protect themselves as for the preceding two nights no protection had been given them against the whites.⁴⁵

So we know that by Sunday night, black people were actively protecting their neighborhoods, even as some were calling on the police to do so. It is not clear whether they were already patrolling in groups, or simply protecting their own individual homes. If they were indeed patrolling on Sunday night, it is difficult to know whether they were only on foot or if they were using cars as well. By Monday night, however, they were definitely doing both.

“[Brownlow] also stated that there was a noticeable disproportion between the number of arrests of white and colored [on Sunday night] and that he had given it out that this practice should be discontinued.”⁴⁶ Throughout the days of the riot, despite Brownlow's directive, this disproportion persisted. Indeed, it was one of the central points of black protest and legal action during and after the riot. “Giving it out” may not have had the same force as a direct order, and Brownlow may also have been disingenuous, if not dishonest, in this meeting. But it is also possible – perhaps even likely – that his officers disregarded the order, in many cases willfully but also because they would have perceived as criminal certain actions by blacks which they simply would not have interpreted in the same way when taken by whites. It is safe to say that white policemen in this situation would have arrested a black person for the mere fact of being

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

armed, regardless of how or whether he or she was using the weapon, while they would have seen armed whites as acting legally. In the legal aftermath of the riot, NAACP and other black lawyers made a point of rigorously contesting the charges of “gun-toting” against black citizens. The criminalization of lawful acts of self defense by African Americans was a key point of contention for black lawyers, and in the weeks and months following the riot they were often successful in fighting such charges.

Monday, July 21

On the front page of Monday’s *Washington Post*, six paragraphs into the paper’s story about Sunday’s rioting, a notification appeared as part of the paper’s coverage:

Mobilization for Tonight

It was learned that a mobilization of every available service man stationed in or near Washington or on leave here has been ordered for tomorrow evening near the Knights of Columbus hut, on Pennsylvania avenue between Seventh and Eighth streets.

The hour of assembly is 9 o’clock and the purpose is a “clean-up” that will cause the events of the last two evenings to pale into insignificance.

Whether official cognizance of this assemblage and its intent will bring about its forestalling cannot be told.⁴⁷

This item was placed early in the body of an article describing the previous day’s violence, which generally depicted blacks as easily victimized,⁴⁸ and also noted that the police had been “practically helpless” and “had done little more than stand while the fighting was going on.” Antilynching activists regularly pointed to the fact that southern papers often published word of an upcoming lynching – in effect inviting spectator/participants – and people would come in large numbers, bringing along entire

⁴⁷ “Scores,” WP, 7/21/1919.

⁴⁸ a depiction which by Tuesday was substantially different.

families. For some, then, the *Washington Post* was simply advertising an impending lynching.

This item demonstrates powerfully how the telling of the story itself became part of the riot. By Friday the NAACP was petitioning Attorney General Palmer to prosecute the paper for incitement based on this item, and many others pointed to it as evidence of how bad things were in the Capital.⁴⁹ The *Nation* would also actively blame the newspaper, saying that “as long as editors encourage lawlessness as cynically as the editor of *The Washington Post*, there can be no hope of averting mob violence anywhere.”⁵⁰ In an alternative reading, the July 22 War Department memo (cited elsewhere this chapter) asserts that the harm of Monday’s exaggerated stories lay in their having effectively “warned every negro to arm himself in the event of more trouble,” rather than inciting white mobs. Though it doesn’t refer specifically to the “mobilization” piece, the memo says that the article was “very exaggerated.” This, in combination with the idea that the papers were warning African Americans, might seem to imply that for the MID reader, the descriptions of blacks being victimized was intended to help rather than terrorize or discourage them. This was the same observer who in reporting on the police said that he had “at no time...observe[d] any laxness of duty on the part of any members of the police force,” a direct contradiction of reports from a range of observers, including his colleague, the *Post*, and NAACP members. To be fair, however, he also characterized as exaggerated the newspaper accounts of “numerous assaults on white women by negroes...during the past few months,” at once endorsing the inflammatory

⁴⁹ Shillady to Palmer, 7/25/19, NAACP papers, D.C. Branch files, G34.

⁵⁰ Editorial, *The Nation*, vol cix, 8/2/19, 133.

idea of a “wave” of assaults and understanding that the papers were overstating the case.⁵¹

Once again, delegations of African American men called on Commissioner Brownlow and Superintendent (a.k.a. Chief of Police) Pullman. One group of NAACP officers – James Cobb, Neval Thomas, William Houston, and W. Franklin Phillips – questioned officials about their preparations for keeping the peace, and again called on them to protect the city’s black citizens from the lawless mob. They repeated the warning that if the police did not do their duty, African American citizens would take steps to protect themselves, their neighborhoods, homes, and families. In a report on the meeting to NAACP headquarters, one of them wrote,

The plain statement was made to the Commissioner and Superintendent of Police...that colored men of Washington had determined not to stand up and be shot down like dogs, but they were prepared to protect their families and themselves and would do so at all hazard – if full and complete protection was not afforded by the proper authorities. They were further told that the men of color were determined that there should be no reproduction in the capital city of the murder and slaughter of colored men, women and children such as had occurred in Atlanta, East St. Louis, Wilmington and Springfield; that they were giving them this warning out of a sense of civic duty in order that nothing might be left undone by the officials to prevent a scene of riot and bloodshed in the city of Washington.⁵²

In their conversation with city officials these local leaders from a national organization explicitly connected what was happening in Washington to recent mob rampages elsewhere, and to the larger specter of lynching. They pointed to East St. Louis and other

⁵¹ Dawson to Peters, 7/22/19, MID Negro Subversion file, RG 165 National Archives. There had been four actual attacks in the months during which the crime wave stories were playing. One man eventually confessed to three of them. (“Crime Mysteries Cleared,” *Washington Post*, 8/8/1920)

⁵² William Houston (?) to Johnson, NAACP papers, D.C. Branch files, G34, Library of Congress, p. 2.

sites of extreme violence in order to warn of a possible worst outcome to events in D.C., and to advise city officials that they would be responsible for such an outcome, if they didn't act decisively – and according to the delegation's recommendations – to prevent it. The men were also declaring black Washingtonians' determination to disrupt that familiar script, if the police themselves did not take appropriate steps to rewrite it.

These men were working on multiple levels. Their open intention to act in self defense if necessary was an assertion not only of their people's rights as citizens, but also of their own manhood as they conceived it. By the very act of confronting the authorities, as much as in what they actually said, they made a political statement: African American citizens were entitled as such to police protection, and their representatives merited the attention and respect of civil servants. At the same time, by calling on officials to act against the white mob, they were trying to force an acknowledgement of the reality as they saw it: that this was a massive lynch mob, that the subtext for the mob's actions, as for their impetus, was the corrupt text that also motivated and rationalized lynching; and that the script must not be allowed to fulfill itself. At the same time, the report itself was a performance, intended for a specific audience – James Weldon Johnson and the rest of the Association hierarchy – and depicting the reporters' actions and words as powerful and effective.⁵³ Such efforts by middle class and elite African American men arose in style and substance from a history reaching back to early nineteenth century black abolitionists and community leaders. The men were enacting the ascendant New Negro politics of assertiveness and determination to claim and hold civic space.

As for the city officials' response, the report makes no note of what they said to the delegation's warnings and demands, and Brownlow's autobiography makes no

⁵³ This point will be investigated further in the next chapter.

mention of the meeting.⁵⁴ As we have seen, Neval Thomas noted privately that the commissioner and the police chief “‘four-flushed’ and begged,” but did nothing. Thomas is unspecific as to what exactly they begged for. If actions do speak louder than words, the fact that there was no change in how the police conducted themselves provides some evidence as to Brownlow’s attitudes, though his influence over the force may have been limited and he may have pushed for action that wasn’t taken. The commissioner did issue a call for order, condemning the attacks and pleading with citizens to refrain from incendiary talk and rumor mongering.⁵⁵

Brownlow and Pullman had other conferences on Monday. They met with Secretary of War Newton C. Baker and the Army Chief of Staff. Baker made a statement deploring servicemen’s participation in the rioting but stating that the War Department had no jurisdiction over the actions of demobilized soldiers. Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels ordered the Naval Commander to report the names of sailors and marines known to have participated in the riot. Both a telephone call and a confidential memo went from Baker’s office to the Adjutant General, ordering him to

designate and hold in readiness a troop of cavalry of not less than 60 men, if available as many as 80, which will be sent, mounted, by you to co-operate with the Chief of Police...in preventing disorder and destruction of property and in quelling riots.⁵⁶

These men were to be armed with both sabers and either pistols or rifles, whichever would be “most effective.” They were to be commanded by “an officer of sound judgment and discretion,...assisted by carefully selected subordinates,” and were to be

⁵⁴ Louis Brownlow, *A Passion for Anonymity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). More in depth discussion of these meetings follows in the next chapter.

⁵⁵ Abernethy, “Race War,” 317-18.

⁵⁶ Jervey to Adjutant General, 7/21/1919, Glasser files, 10218-364, RG 60, National Archives.

ready to come into the city from Fort Myer at a call from either Pullman or an army general. Clearly the secretary understood that this was a sensitive assignment, and a potentially dangerous one, hence the weaponry and the need for specially selected commanding officers.

Secretary Baker was busy on Monday. In anticipation of the night's rioting, he conferred with "Secretary Daniels, Gen. March, Commissioner Brownlow, Maj. Pullman, Capt. Leigh, chief of the bureau of navigation; Maj. Gen. Kerr, acting adjutant general of the army, and Maj. Gen. Barnett, commandant of the marine corps." He received a letter from the District branch of the NAACP. Like the previous day's letter to Navy Secretary Daniels, this one pointed out news reports of widespread participation in the mobs by soldiers, and asked what the command proposed to do about the illegal actions of its men. Referring to recent events of major concern to the nation's African Americans, the letter argued,

Clashes between civilians and soldiers heretofore have always been investigated, and usually punishment meted out to those adjudged guilty, particularly in the cases of riots at Brownsville and Houston, Texas. Colored people are naturally interested to know if such clashes are investigated only where white people are the injured parties.⁵⁷

Branch officers did not hesitate, even when addressing cabinet members of a fundamentally hostile administration, to claim civil rights or to advocate for fair treatment by pointing – sometimes acerbically – to transgressions against the principle of equal protection for black citizens. The Association's efforts in contending with the powerful combined to great effect with its fiery calls on black citizens to fight their own

⁵⁷ "Report to Members" 7/23/19, NAACP, D.C. Branch files, G34, LOC. The allusion is to the punishment of black soldiers found guilty of rioting in these cities, deemed by many to be inordinate and unjust. See Chapter 1 of this dissertation; also Henri and Barbeau; Ellis.

oppression. It seems important that the organization's leadership (as well as to a lesser extent its membership) was still interracial; the combination of important white Progressives and both elite and grassroots black leaders was highly effective. However, as Mark Schneider notes in his history of the organization in this period, it is also significant that at this moment (1919-20), with Johnson and Walter White moving into the secretariat, the organization's interracial leadership was first dominated by African Americans.⁵⁸ It is undoubtedly true that its legal and political efforts inspired many African Americans of all classes and regions to look to the Association for help and guidance on both large matters and small. It is also true that they offered it a great deal of support in return.⁵⁹

Monday evening, NAACP Publicity Director Herbert Seligmann arrived in the city from the national headquarters in New York City "to get first hand information about the riot and to give his time to following up the demands of the Branch for better police protection and for the checking and punishment of the white rioters."⁶⁰ The organization was pulling out its big guns. It was already clear on Sunday evening to leaders in New York that this riot was significant, in itself and in terms of their national strategy. They acted quickly to get to their connections in the federal government in regard to events in the capital, as well as to mobilize other allies.⁶¹ The Association's archives show an

⁵⁸ Schneider, "*We Return Fighting*," 5.

⁵⁹ One of Schneider's main arguments is that, contrary to standard "myth," the NAACP actually had a substantial mass base (4). A cursory glance through the NAACP correspondence files shows notes and letters of all kinds, from people all over the country, looking for help with local problems, thanking and praising the organization for its work, calling on it for more, for answers to large questions, for further action. See NAACP Archives, LOC and MSRC.

⁶⁰ "Report to Members" 7/23/19, NAACP papers, D.C. Branch files, G34.

⁶¹ For instance, the Glasser files at the National Archives hold a copy of a July 23 letter from Baker's secretary to Julia Lathrop of the Children's Bureau in the Labor Department explaining that Baker had missed a meeting with Seligmann the previous day because he'd been called to a meeting at the White House. (10218-364, RG 60, National Archives).

active back and forth via telegram between New York and Washington, as officers made arrangements for travel, accommodations, and meetings, and sent advice as to which government officials should be contacted and what to say. There was a concerted plan of action, based on prior experience and driven by the understanding that the location and magnitude of this riot necessitated a substantial and immediate response.⁶²

Seligmann later wrote that it was on Monday that the District's African Americans began to arm themselves, because they were disheartened by the police department's poor showing in the prior days' events. We know from other reports that people were already armed on Sunday, but others went out on Monday to buy guns and ammunition.⁶³ According to an internal NAACP document, on Monday night "at least 2000 Negroes, many with pistols showing," were mobilized to defend the black section along the U Street corridor in the northwest – "declaring their purpose to die for their race, and defy the white mob which was announced as coming to colored sections."⁶⁴ Whether they thought the police lacked the power, the will, or both, it is clear that black Washingtonians were preparing themselves in large numbers for another night of mayhem. The various delegations had let the Police Commissioner and Superintendent know as much when they met with them that day.

One of the things the NAACP group suggested in their meeting was that the police should commission discharged black soldiers and officers to act as part of the riot reinforcements for the police because black citizens were suspicious of white troops. Like most of their warnings and requests, this one was ignored. There is no mention in any of

⁶² NAACP Archives, D.C. Branch files, Box G-34, Library of Congress.

⁶³ See also Waskow, 27.

⁶⁴ Neval Thomas to A. Grimke, misdated 6/28/1919. MSRC Archibald Grimke Papers, NAACP Correspondence, box 39-28, folder 561 (July 1919).

the records – newspaper, NAACP, or military – of black men being part of any official riot control, except in instances such as that mentioned by Anderson, Kendrick, and Hayes, where local men accompanied precinct captains as they went through neighborhoods asking blacks to stay inside.⁶⁵ The dearth of black officers had long been point of worry and complaint for African Americans in D.C., and the riot served as evidence for subsequent arguments on this point.⁶⁶

Also on Monday, African American women from the Parents' League and a number of black ministers began going from door to door in black neighborhoods urging people to stay off the streets. According to a MID report, on July 28 there was a meeting about the riot at Shiloh Baptist Church led by one of these ministers, Dr. Waldron. At one point a member of the Parents' League spoke. Mrs. Tanner expressed the opinion that the League and those ministers had saved the city from a massacre. Her husband also got up and said that he and Dr. Waldron and some others had

been 'tipped' off that on Monday night the soldiers were to have rapid fire guns in trucks and were going to shoot into the mobs at 7th and 'T' streets, Northwest, and [they] got in an automobile and went to see those in authority in the City and explained the situation and they went to the Capitol and talked with Senator Sherman and Congressman Segel of New York and others and were welcomed everywhere on the 'hill' and could have seen the President had they wished to and as a result of their work there was no 'shooting into the mob'....⁶⁷

⁶⁵ NAACP archives, D.C. Branch files, G34, LOC.

⁶⁶ In fact, in the aftermath of the Red Summer, the NAACP sent questionnaires to police chiefs around the country inquiring as to the presence and numbers of black policemen on their forces; whether – if they had them – these officers worked in black or white sections of the city; whether there were differences in the effectiveness of white or black officers working in white or black sections; whether there was an advantage in having black policemen; and asking too for any suggestions the chiefs might have. These questionnaires seem to have been intended to have both the overt purpose of gathering information and also to be covertly suggesting to police officials that there would in fact be advantages to having black men on their forces. (NAACP papers, Library of Congress, Box C-4, General Correspondence, August 1-6, 1919)

⁶⁷ "Colored Meeting at Shiloh Baptist Church Relative to Race Riots," Memo to Major Pratt, 7/28/1919, MID "Negro Subversion" file, 10218-350, RG 165, National Archives.

I have found no other specific record of their meetings with politicians, but Waldron and Tanner would later be castigated by Neval Thomas of the NAACP and others for their actions, which were seen as overly deferential to the white people. According to Thomas, “the people [were] very angry with Waldron and Tanner for getting out dodgers telling the colored people to stay in off the streets;” they saw this as toadying.⁶⁸ The idea of self defense men like Thomas were celebrating entailed standing up to the mob, not staying inside and out of the way. As for the question of the soldiers’ plans to use “rapid-fire guns” against the black people, it is possible that such plans were afoot, especially in light of the *Post*’s “Mobilization” call, and it is also possible that those plans could have been foiled by the officials once they were notified. The source of the “tip” and the logistics of the series of meetings with officials and politicians are unknowable, and again, not mentioned elsewhere.

On Monday a group of black pastors and citizens met at the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church “under the auspices of the National Race Congress” and sent a telegram to the President and the commissioners and police chief of the District. The text of the telegram appeared in the *Post* on Tuesday. After outlining the violence of Sunday night, they complained, “As law-abiding citizens, we look to the police department for protection, but in this crisis they have utterly failed us. Notwithstanding their knowledge of the mob’s threat of a second attack, yet they took no precaution that a competent and efficient police department would have employed.” The telegram went on to call for leave to be revoked from all military men in the area and for the proper punishment of

⁶⁸ Thomas to Grimke misdated 6/28/1919. MSRC Archibald Grimke Papers, NAACP Correspondence, box 39-28, folder 561 (July 1919).

those who had participated in the “riotous actions.” In closing, they requested “the commissioners to demand of the chief of police that the citizens of the District of Columbia be rightly protected.”⁶⁹ Though they did not meet with officials in person, these ministers were making the same demands and claims on the government as the delegations of lawyers and other pastors who were calling on them as part of the NAACP’s program, and they were furthermore broadcasting their demands publicly.

One local post of the American Legion likewise adopted a resolution on the riot after a “largely attended” meeting on Monday night. The statement condemned the participation of military men in uniform “or former service men” in the violence, “except where they take part to aid the police in quelling the disorders.” One of their number also counseled members to “keep away from crowds and counsel any men in uniform they might see to do likewise.”⁷⁰

According to the *Post*, city police estimated that over 500 guns and hundreds of rounds of ammunition were sold by pawnshops and other dealers on Monday, and in fact by Tuesday people were traveling to Baltimore and Alexandria to buy weapons, because District suppliers were sold out.⁷¹ D.C. authorities bemoaned the fact that they could not control the sale of guns and ammunition, although according to the *Post*, “[a]t the request of the District authorities, several of the larger dealers refused to sell firearms,”⁷² presumably to anyone, though in certain places dealers were refusing only African Americans.⁷³ The *Post* reported that “by far the larger part of weapons taken from

⁶⁹ “Negro Pastors and Citizens Call on the President and Officials for Protection,” WP 7/22/1919.

⁷⁰ “Legion Denounces Share of Service Men in Riots,” WP 7/22/1919.

⁷¹ “One Dead and Another Dying, Shot by Negro,” WP, 7/23/1919.

⁷² “Nation’s Capital Held at Mercy of the Mob; Stern Action Tonight,” WP 7/22/1919.

⁷³ “One Dead,” WP 7/23/1919.

prisoners are absolutely new” but this is questionable, since the same article reports that the many of the weapons sales came through second-hand dealers and pawnshops.⁷⁴

There were rumors that among African Americans, weaponry, ammunition, and expertise were often supplied by men who had only recently returned from serving in France.⁷⁵ Such talk seems to have had a solid basis. As early as March, one report from Walter Loving had a veteran, Captain Wormley Jones, declaring at a public meeting of the MuSoLit Club his intention to use the skills and weaponry he had gained in Europe at home if necessary:

I am not a public speaker but a soldier and a fighter. I went to France to fight the Hun and I accomplished that object. To prove that I did, I brought back a German machine gun which I captured single handed; that gun I have now at my home with plenty of ammunition. I also have an Austrian high powered rifle and the best automatic revolver made. After fighting and suffering for democracy abroad, we are told to return to our homes and be calm and unassuming. I am not going around with a chip on my shoulder, but when I am insulted and my rights denied me, I am here to tell you that I am ready to declare war any minute.⁷⁶

One of the city’s many black clubs, MuSoLit stood for Music, Social and Literature, though its programs tended to be mostly political. The all-male society was founded in 1905 by professional men and sponsored an annual dinner which was one of the most important social events of the year for the city’s “black 400.”⁷⁷ The fact that a speaker at such an elite gathering was openly expressing his intention to fight indicates how embattled and determined the city’s black population felt, months before the fighting broke out. It is safe to assume that Captain Jones was not alone in either his experience or

⁷⁴ “Nation’s Capital,” WP 7/22/1919.

⁷⁵ “Washington Riots,” Baltimore *Afro-American* (BAA), 7/25/1919.

⁷⁶ Walter Loving papers, , Box 113-1, folder 12, MSRC.

⁷⁷ Anacostia, 139; Fitzpatrick and Goodwin, 146.

his attitude, and that men like himself were active in the response to the white mob. As we have seen, class distinctions were incredibly important in black Washington. Though I have not found documentary evidence of the thoughts or intentions of black working class Washingtonians, their actions on the street are telling. Part of the significance of this riot lies in the fact that it was an occasion for cross-class solidarity in a context where such coming together was rare at best.

Loving offers further evidence of both cross-class solidarity and of the fact that the decision to take arms was not limited to any particular sector of the city's black populace. In an August 1919 report on conditions in the city, Loving states that in ongoing discussions about the riot, "It is claimed that the bootleggers saved the day because they were well prepared so far as ammunition and arms are concerned. High powered cars formed ammunition trains between Washington and Baltimore during the first days of the riot." It is logical that members of the city's black underworld would have participated in the defense of black people and neighborhoods, not merely for the sake of solidarity or personal safety but also as a way of protecting business interests. Loving mentions that the bootleggers were based in the southwest section of the city, and says that they went from there in "high powered cars to the assistance of the 'black belt' in the northwest section of the city," where most of the trouble was.⁷⁸

Though there were intermittent fights all day on Monday, it was that night that brought the worst battles of the riot, with four people killed and several critically wounded. Once night fell, "[b]lazing race hatred turned the streets of Washington into

⁷⁸ Loving, "Conditions Among Negroes in Washington," report to Director of Military Intelligence, 8/10/1919. "Negro Subversion" files, MID file 10218-350, RG 165, National Archives.

battlefields.”⁷⁹ A mob of over 1000 people surged for hours around a large area surrounding the National Mall, contained by a cavalry cordon which “had been thrown around the downtown section from Seventh street to Fifteenth street, and from the mall south of [Independence?] avenue to above H street northwest,”⁸⁰ a fairly large area (some 50 square blocks, plus over half the Mall) within which to do damage.

Outside the boundaries of the cordon, there were a number of lethal encounters in residential neighborhoods. In its coverage of Monday night, the *Post* completely shifted its perspective on the violence. Prior to this point, blacks were generally depicted as helpless victims of the mob.

Yesterday, last night and early today it was the negroes [sic] in nearly every case that provoked trouble. They were spurred on by a desire of revenge for the beating administered to members of their race by the whites Sunday night, and sullenly and determinedly the lawless among them formed their plans for retribution. The stark spirit of racial hatred stood strongly out; men, white and black, forgot that the riots were precipitated by assaults on white women by negroes.⁸¹

There is an implication in the last sentence that until they forgot about the assaults on white women, guilt had kept the city’s blacks from fighting back. The imputation of sullenness also carries an idea of guilt, and of childishness. In fact it was not true that African Americans waited until Monday to fight back, though it seems clear that after Sunday night their resistance to the mob intensified, and was by then more organized and less dispersed. African American observers would interpret any slowness to fight as indicating not guilt or fear but rationality and a civilized reluctance to sink to the mob’s level.

⁷⁹ “Nation’s Capital,” WP 7/22/19.

⁸⁰ “Scores are Injured,” WP 7/21/19.

⁸¹ “Nation’s Capital,” WP 7/22/19.

But it is also apparent that some people were taking retaliatory and not just defensive action. Neval

Thomas asserts in his note to Grimke: “The Negroes’ conduct was indeed heroic and noble. It was one of reprisal but it was effective, and pursued with beautiful purpose and self sacrifice.”⁸² One MID report described

bands of fifty to one hundred negroes touring the city, carrying revolvers, black-jacks, and razors, and retaliating by making attacks on sailors, soldiers, and civilians. Hundreds of shots were fired from automobiles loaded with negroes driving about the city in a defiant attitude, but most of these shots went wild.⁸³

As we have seen, African Americans in the city themselves credited much of the success of their defiance of the white rioters to the bootleggers, with their cars and guns.⁸⁴ Clearly this portion of the populace, and others perhaps less enmeshed in criminal enterprise but willing and ready to join forces under these circumstances, were an important factor in the black effort, though it is impossible to know to what extent.

Not everyone was ready to acknowledge (much less celebrate) this unity, however. The *Bee* in a typically class-conscious discussion insisted that it was not “the lawless” seeking “retribution,” who fought the whites, but rather respectable citizens who took armed action to keep themselves safe, since the police had failed to do so. “It was a night of terror,” the paper explained, “and not a police officer, to any extent, could be found.”⁸⁵ An editorial in the same issue went on:

⁸² Thomas to A. Grimke, misdated 6/28/1919. MSRC A. Grimke Papers, NAACP Correspondence, box 39-28, folder 561 (July 1919).

⁸³ “Negro Agitation,” Memo to Director of Military Intelligence, 7/1/1919 [*sic*], Glasser files, 10218-364, RG 60, National Archives.

⁸⁴ Loving, “Conditions Among Negroes in Washington,” report to Director of Military Intelligence, 8/10/1919. “Negro Subversion” files, MID file 10218-350, RG 165, National Archives.

⁸⁵ “The Colored Americans’ Reward for Fighting for ‘World Democracy,’” *Bee*, 7/26/19.

The police department could not protect the colored citizens, so they were forced to protect themselves....

It is charged that the bad element of the colored people were in the mob. This *The Bee* denies. The cause of all the colored people was common, and the mob did not respect any colored man or woman, so long as his or her face was black. The authorities were warned and appealed to to give the colored people protection Monday night.

Representative colored delegations called upon the Commissioners and asked for protection, but no encouragement was given them. The Commissioners were informed that the colored citizens would do no more than protect themselves. The colored citizens of Washington are law-abiding....⁸⁶

In this passage the *Bee*, which regularly complained to readers about black Washingtonians it found lacking in respectability and propriety, closed ranks against white accusers and the dangerous implications of their analyses. The paper would veer back and forth in its editorials from decrying the behavior of the black “bad element” to refuting the idea that African Americans were at fault in any of the trouble. The middle-class oriented paper was steeped in the intense classism of the city but also an organ of race pride and sometimes found itself contradictory in its impulses. Again, it is impossible to know what the actual breakdown was of who was fighting or prepared to fight against the whites, or whether their primary motivations were “respectable” defense of property or “retaliatory” opportunism. And the probability is that in many cases it was a mix of these and other kinds of sentiments.

The shift of tone in white accounts after Monday did not affect the tendency to infantilize African Americans; they were no longer hapless victims but they were nevertheless irrational in their sullenness and refusal to take responsibility for what happened. The subtext was a variation on the lynching scenario: black rapists had

⁸⁶ Ibid.

provoked white citizens to a righteous rage. Rather than submit to the virtuous retribution of the mob, African Americans were sullen and defiant, proving once again not only their own irresponsible and childish nature, but the necessity of white action. The *Post*'s stories of Monday night are full of images that reinforce this subtext, reading nefarious criminality into actions blacks saw as either necessary for their self defense, or righteously retributive.

Until almost daylight groups of belligerent negroes, armed to the teeth, were touring the streets of the city in automobiles, evading or defying the heavy police and military patrol, particularly in the outlying sections.⁸⁷

This description, framed very differently, is corroborated and even elaborated by the account in a local black paper. According to the *Baltimore Afro-American*,

On Monday, the colored people, infuriated by the inability of the police to afford protection retaliated by shooting and beating every white person that came into the Southwest section....Motormen and conductors were pulled off street cars, and armed men in motor cars took pot shots at police and whites wherever these showed themselves.⁸⁸

However it was interpreted, such mayhem put at nought the peacemaking efforts of the day, when government officials and private citizens had worked to bring the violence under control. Indeed, according to the *Post*, on Monday "Washington had the wildest night of its history....[and] [b]lood literally flowed in the city's ordinarily peaceful streets and avenues."⁸⁹ The police and their military supplement of at least 400 were unable to contain it, and frequently showed up only in the aftermath of a fight. The *Post* claimed

⁸⁷ "Nation's Capital," WP 7/22/19.

⁸⁸ "54 Victims of Washington Riots," BAA, 7/25/1919.

⁸⁹ "Nation's Capital," WP 7/22/1919.

that on Monday “service men were scarce among the fighters,” because most had been restricted to barracks unless assigned to riot duty.⁹⁰

As for African American soldiers, it appears that any who were present in the city during the riot were not on active duty. Walter Loving had reported in March on a great deal of discontent among black officers who were being quickly mustered out despite their desire to remain in the service. The Chief of Staff of the 92nd Division had stated outright to those officers that he was “opposed to colored officers being commissioned in the regular army and [would] disapprove any applications presented for that purpose.” He also mentioned elsewhere the mustering-out in mid-March of the First Separate Battalion of the District National Guard (who had first been called up to protect government buildings around the capital immediately after the U.S. entered the war).⁹¹ At a reception honoring those soldiers, speakers (including William Houston) “emphasized the fact that the returning soldiers fought for democracy abroad and are now ready to fight for the same democracy at home.” Loving also notes the widespread feeling among soldiers of “expecting democracy at home,” and comments that “when the soldiers themselves are not using the expression, they can always find some one to express their sentiments....”⁹²

In addition to Loving’s information about how the Army hastened to muster out black soldiers and officers on their return from France, further evidence for the unlikelihood of there having been black soldiers on active duty in the capital during the riot comes in a statement of Army policy from September of 1917. Two months after the massacre in East St. Louis, the Army Chief of Staff had received a memorandum from the Provost Marshal recommending that, “owing to the unsettled condition of the country

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ See Chapter 1.

⁹² Walter H. Loving papers, MSRC Box 113-1, folder 12.

at large, and of Washington in particular, especially in connection with the negro question,” a black battalion stationed at Fort Myer (in the District) be ordered elsewhere and replaced with a white battalion.⁹³ This long-standing order indicates that the Army took into consideration the state of local race relations when stationing black troops. There is no question that in 1919 Washington had been “unsettled” for some time before July 19th, and the city’s substantial and active black population would have further discouraged the brass from keeping black soldiers nearby.

On Monday night, as on Sunday, there were skirmishes downtown as well as various attempts by white mobs to cross into black sections. During the day, there had been at least one confrontation: at midday, a crowd of military men challenged a policeman holding one of their number for arrest at Seventh and Pennsylvania, a perpetual hotspot not far from the Knights of Columbus hut which seems to have served as a headquarters for some members of the white mob. The policeman was “forced to fire into the air” to hold the crowd off until the patrol wagon appeared, but he was successful in delivering his prisoner.⁹⁴ The *Post* reported that the evening’s fighting began in earnest around 8:00 with

the first clash between a crowd of white men and negroes which was the prelude to a swift succession of lurid and bloody scenes – the surgings of mobs through uptown streets, the rattle of shots, the dashings to and fro of automobiles laden with police and soldiers, the clang of ambulance gongs and the thousand alarming sights and sounds of the most serious race riot in the Capital’s history.⁹⁵

⁹³ Glasser files, 10218-364, RG 60, National Archives.

⁹⁴ Young, 137.

⁹⁵ “Nation’s Capital,” WP 7/22/1919.

The paper describes clashes between groups of different sizes around the downtown area, where “negroes fared badly” while “the police looked with apathy upon the task of taking any violent measures to break up the mob.” At one point a white mob of “over 1000” made a concerted effort to cross into a black area. With a major charge, the cavalry was able to hold the crowd within its cordon, and “during the remainder of the night it ranged along F street, and G street from Seventh to Fifteenth street, and the cordon held.” This particular mob was apparently content to remain within the cordon, pulling people off streetcars, chasing them down on the street and beating them.⁹⁶ Indeed, African American observers suggested that the mob chose not to break through the cordon because it would have been so dangerous for them outside it.⁹⁷ Outside the cavalry’s line, and around the city, much more was happening.

Just north of the cavalry cordon that night a young black woman shot two white policemen who came into her home, killing one of them. This woman, nineteen years old, had been shooting out the window of her home at 220 G Street in the Northwest at a group of whites. Tuttle notes that in the Chicago riot African Americans “usually employed such individual tactics as sniping, while whites resorted to mob warfare,” and this was also frequently true in D.C., though of course not to the exclusion of other tactics.⁹⁸ The papers described black householders shooting into the street through “loop-holes” and from behind barricades. In this instance, the white crowd brought in the police. In pursuit of whoever was sniping at the crowd on G Street, Detective Sergeant Harry Wilson and his partner broke into the house, running upstairs and into a darkened bedroom. After a few moments shots came from under the bed, killing Wilson and

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ “The Colored Americans’ Reward,” WB 7/26/1919.

⁹⁸ Tuttle, *Race Riot*, 34.

injuring his fellow officer. After returning fire, the police pulled a terrified and wounded Carrie Minor Johnson, 19, and her father Benjamin out from under the bed and arrested them.

Many reports note in passing the presence of black women in the cars patrolling black sections, and we can be sure that Carrie Johnson was not unique in taking violent action. Working class and poor African American women were well accustomed to taking care of and standing up for themselves and their families. This meant that women and girls, across class lines, were not brought up to look to or rely solely on men for economic or physical protection.⁹⁹ For Carrie Johnson or any other black woman to take action in this way was by no means anomalous or aberrant. In fact, we could perhaps see in the failure of commentators to make much of this apparent contravention of gender “rules,” and certainly of gender rhetoric, evidence that such actions were not, in lived reality, remarkable at all.¹⁰⁰

Meanwhile, other black people in Carrie Johnson’s neighborhood and elsewhere were acting singly or in groups from the same motivation. The *Post* reports that about 15 blocks north of the Johnson home, near Howard University,

the negroes swept their own section in the northwest clear. They began early, and before dark half a dozen white men had been badly beaten on U and T streets between Seventh and Fourteenth streets.¹⁰¹

This was apparently the same crowd Neval Thomas described in his letter to Archibald Grimke as having “beat several marines and other whites as they passed on the street

⁹⁹ One could of course point out that Euro-American women, especially non-elites, were very often not living according to these ideals either.

¹⁰⁰ We will look more closely at Carrie Johnson in the next chapter.

¹⁰¹ “Nation’s Capital,” WP 7/22/1919.

cars.”¹⁰² As the black delegation had warned police officials, African Americans were ready to defend against the white mob, or indeed, any white individuals who might appear. The *New York Age*, a black paper, later claimed that on Monday African Americans actually had three machine guns and copious ammunition, along with hand grenades in “high powered cars” ready to “attack the white population.”¹⁰³

Other than the previously mentioned assertion of Captain Wormley Jones that he owned a German machine gun, I have found only one other specific mention of African Americans possessing or using that type of weaponry in Washington. In a different MID report, J.E. Cutler noted that recently demobilized members of the black 368th had “boasted of their ability to handle guns and of their determination to use the arms in their possession rather than submit to unjust treatment.”¹⁰⁴ Though it seems likely the *Post* would have made much of such a discovery, it is certainly possible that such arms were present, though they may not have been put to use.¹⁰⁵

Although there are discrepancies in the specific descriptions of the black armed patrols, as to how many there actually were and how wide-ranging, a few things about them seem clear. In at least some of the cars there were armed women as well as men, and there was some degree of organization – that is, some of the cars were organized into patrols and were part of relatively coherent if perhaps diffuse efforts mounted in concert to protect black areas. There are some reports that the leadership and some of the weaponry came from black soldiers and former soldiers. It seems most likely that this

¹⁰² Thomas to Grimke, A. Grimke Papers, NAACP Correspondence, box 39-28, folder 561, MSRC.

¹⁰³ Abernethy, p. 318; *NY Age* 8/2

¹⁰⁴ J.E. Cutler, “Race Riots in Washington, D.C.” Memo for the Director of Military Intelligence, “Negro Subversion” file, 10218-350, RG 165, National Archives. See also, Slotkin, 283-89; Barbeau and Henri, 150-52, 172; Du Bois, “Essay on the Great War,” 719-731.

¹⁰⁵ In his description of the Chicago riot, Harry Haywood says that a Browning submachine gun and some army issue Springfield rifles were brought out by black veterans as part of the defense of one black neighborhood against the mob. (Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 82)

was true in some instances but probably not all, since we know that pawn shops and other dealers had sold so many weapons before they were forced to stop. As Loving reported, some of the cars were driven by and/or populated with bootleggers and their associates. Whether or not these vehicles participated in the organized patrols, they were certainly a factor, and may in fact have comprised the majority of autos in use by African Americans.

There were a number of isolated shootings around the city. Micajah Walker, a medical student who worked as a messenger at the Treasury Department, was riding his motorcycle in the city on Monday night.¹⁰⁶ As he passed by or through a large crowd in front of Riggs Bank, he was hit on the head. The police later said that he admitted to having then “discharged a revolver, aiming low, and in a way which he believed would not result in injury to any one.” A young marine standing nearby was struck in the neck by one of Walker’s bullets, and brought to Emergency Hospital in serious condition. He would not die until Wednesday. Walker was arrested, “after a chase and a wrestling match.”¹⁰⁷ The shooting, however, was not deemed a murder. After the marine, Louis Havlicek, died, Walker was charged with manslaughter. He was acting alone, but he was acting in self defense. It is likely that Walker’s class status was central to his escaping a murder charge.

There are numerous reports of outright aggression by African Americans on Monday. The *World* describes a black crowd attacking a streetcar at Fourth and N,¹⁰⁸ and

¹⁰⁶ According to newspaper reports, he was on his way to work; by other accounts he was out looking for his neighbor’s children, who had not come home (Anacostia, 166). But this account seems questionable at least in part because it dates the shooting on July 19 (Saturday) and one would assume that the newspapers would have reported it sooner than Tuesday had it happened so early in the riot, if only in order to make as much of it as possible.

¹⁰⁷ “One Riot Victim Dies; Troops Quiet Capital; Crowds Quit Streets,” WP 7/24/1919.

¹⁰⁸ NY *World*, 7/22.

there were several instances of black people firing guns from various vehicles – streetcars, trucks, autos – at white crowds. The *Times* and the *Star* both reported that late Monday morning four African Americans shot from a speeding car at patients and a sentry outside the Naval Hospital. No one was injured and the car and its occupants, including at least one woman, were captured later that day.¹⁰⁹ As W.E. Hawkins would tell it six weeks later in the *Messenger*,

Monday night the long pent up race consciousness of a persecuted and over-patriotic and patient people broke out in a mad rage and frenzy, transforming them into desperate demons raving with the passionate impulse of revenge. Streams of wounded began flowing to the hospitals and it was evident everywhere that the battle was on and the soul of the Negro was in it. The police authorities realized the direfulness of the situation and threw a cordon of police around the principal thoroughfares of the city, forming a terrible battle line which wavered, swelled, swayed and quivered as the restless surging mass of enraged humanity rushed it here and there. Some rushed to their homes and waited upon their weapons, others delirious with madness dashed into the streets, shouting, shooting, men let loose upon the war path, till once peaceful Washington became a seething hell of fury and madness.¹¹⁰

While Hawkins' language is certainly lurid and his characterization of the city's black population seems to leave whole sectors out. But there is a feeling of riot in his telling, a sense of the energy and chaos, the danger and release that must have been part of the experience for many on the street, whether or not they were part of any violence, as victims or as perpetrators. Other stories hint at this feeling, and the piling on of anecdotes in the pages and pages of coverage in the *Post* convey it through sheer volume and disorganization.

¹⁰⁹ Abernethy, p. 319, NYT 7/22/1919; Washington *Evening Star*, 7/22/1919.

¹¹⁰ W.E. Hawkins, "When Negroes Shot a Lynching Bee into Perdition," *Messenger*, September 1919, 28.

Monday's instances of aggressive rather than defensive violence by black Washingtonians seem to signal a shift in the action. Certainly the news stories change. In their stories of Monday's events the white papers more frequently characterize black actors as aggressors rather than entirely hapless victims, or, when they did fight back or even instigate, as hysterically reactive rather than calculating. The result is a depiction that again conveys the wildness of the riot, even as it veers back and forth in its stereotyping. Thus, the front page of Tuesday's *Post* painted a frightening picture, with "groups of belligerent negroes, armed to the teeth, . . . touring the streets of the city in automobiles." Elsewhere in the same article, though, the paper says that "[t]hroughout the negro sections of the northwest a feeling akin to panic swept," and then a few lines down it notes that "...the night's work found the negro disturbers well armed, and well supplied with ammunition. And they did not hesitate to use their arms, the casualty list shows." The writer draws on two dominant and only apparently incompatible stereotypes of African American men. As victims they were effeminate and hysterical, but as "disturbers" threateningly hyper-masculine, beast-like. The inconsistencies between these two characterizations would not have been dissonant to most white readers at the time; each in its own way reinforced dominant racial thinking and rationalized violence against black men. Indeed, in terms of the larger story of which the riot is a part, both figures could be seen as rapists, according to white racist ideology.¹¹¹ The most common lynching scenario relied upon exactly this combination of tropes, in fact: the cowardly

¹¹¹ See Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), among others. Scholars from anthropology as well as history have shown in numerous texts how this kind of stereotyping frequently appears in US anti-Japanese, anti-Chinese, as well as in Anglo-Indian, African, and other European colonialist ideologies. The feminized brown man can just as easily be depicted as a rapist as the uncivilized savage.

and yet ferocious black beast rapist. The basic lynching story presupposed an overriding trait: black men, whether shrinking cowards or hulking beasts, could not control themselves. In this line of thinking, the lynch mob was a manly, rational, and honorable response to the ultimate menace. The complicity of papers like the *Post* in this fiction was part of the formula.

It should not be surprising that there were a variety of responses by black Washingtonians to what was happening. The city's black population was large, diverse, and not necessarily unified, except perhaps in terms of the most basic imperative, which was to survive. How to effect that survival, and what to do besides, were decisions to be made on more individual terms. In any case, it seems clear that in addition to those simply concerned with protecting their homes and neighborhoods, some of the groups of blacks in the autos and on the streets were probably indeed simply marauders, as the white papers put it, at least part of the time.

In a July 26th editorial titled "Not to Blame" the *Bee* seems to imply as much, opening with the statement that "[t]he unjust attack on colored citizens for acts committed by the jacklegs murderers and cut-throats of the race is not fair." The writer does not claim that there are no lawbreakers or miscreants among the city's black population, but subtly and by implication, walking what would be a dangerous line for a black man in most other cities, he reminds his readers that this is true of both races. The piece draws parallels between certain kinds of people – those who are "*law-abiding*" – across race lines, asserting two racially blind bases for unity:

Those who have lived in this city for years know that the respectable class of colored citizens are just as law-abiding as the respectable class of white citizens, and they don't

believe in colored highwaymen assaulting young women,
white or colored.¹¹²

The attempt is to bring Washingtonians together based on “respectability,” which may or may not have an *economic* class implication, at least for African Americans in this period. A substantial portion of the working class – churchgoers in particular – would have asserted a respectability that did not necessarily correspond to material prosperity.¹¹³ At the same time the writer is sounding a theme specific to Washington in this period, calling on longtime residents to unite against the newcomers whose ways threaten the city’s prior equilibrium. Like most nostalgic calls, it relies to a certain extent on a mythic, retouched past rather than actual memory, but it does allude to the current reality of overcrowding and pressure on older inhabitants. That pressure was without a doubt a central factor in the genesis of the riot, and the fact that the majority of the newcomers were white, young, and from rural southern backgrounds is central to the culture clash the writer alludes to here in calling together “those who have lived in [the] city for years.”

For a combination of reasons, therefore, the actions of African Americans on Monday night resulted in at least one important change in the way things played out, compared to how they had been on Saturday and Sunday: “whites fared as badly or worse than” blacks.¹¹⁴ Though the arrest ratio continued to be skewed radically in the whites’ favor, the distribution of injuries was more equal. The *Post* had a box on page one, titled THE DEAD AND WOUNDED. Of the three dead two are black, both of those “fatally shot” (presumably, not dead but expected to die) are white, and five of the eight seriously

¹¹² “Not to Blame,” editorial, *Washington Bee*, 7/26, p. 4.

¹¹³ See Higginbotham, Gilmore, Lewis.

¹¹⁴ Abernethy, p. 319.

wounded are white.¹¹⁵ The fact that three of the latter are policemen seems notable, as does the fact that one is a white woman. Though they are mentioned as observers here and there, I have found no stories of white women acting as part of the mob or engaged in any violence but it is unlikely that they were altogether absent. This list does not account for the many wounded of both races whom the paper said filled the city's hospitals in such great numbers that no count of the injured was attempted. The black citizenry's commitment to self defense and taking up arms was definitely an equalizing factor. The paper asserts that

[e]very negro engaged in the scores of battles seemed to be armed, while the whites carried but few weapons. Though faced by a condition without parallel in Washington since the civil war, the police seemed loath to draw their guns. To this fact is attributable their high number of casualties in proportion to the whole.¹¹⁶

The characterization of the police as unwilling to use their firearms seems accurate, and is indeed puzzling, though of course in the case of Carrie Johnson they did not hesitate. This suggests that the police may not have been present for many of the shooting incidents. It is also possible that some number of them were not armed. The *Post* points to lack of foresight on the part of police and military commanders, though it doesn't really fault them for it:

But the vision of a night red with pistol shots and blood did not come to the eyes of any man in the conferences [between police and military commanders]. All measures taken were precautionary. When the storm broke, it was too late to call out the forces that might have been mobilized at an earlier hour.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ The paper always notes persons as "colored" or "negro."

¹¹⁶ "Nation's Capital," WP 7/22/1919.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Despite the paper's vendetta against the department, in this case police leaders were not to be blamed for failing to see the form the storm would take. They had planned in anticipation of another night of sporadic fighting like Sunday, according to the *Post*. The black papers were not so lenient, and for weeks castigated city officials for failing to heed the pleas and warnings of black citizens.

As the white dailies had it, the police response was calibrated to a certain kind of problem, different from what it actually faced. Even as it depicted blacks on Monday night in frightening terms, the *Post* characterized white mobs as less threatening, exuberant rather than actually dangerous.

Times after times the mobs surged with more or less good nature against the lines south of the avenue. But no serious effort was made to break through to the objective of the rioters, which was the negro section in the southwest.¹¹⁸

Again, the white narrative has shifted. It is now the blacks who are menacing, uncontrolled, deadly.¹¹⁹ The white mob is no longer dangerous, but rather playful, boyish, even good natured, if overly boisterous. Even the fact that the mob's destination is the racially mixed and poor southwest rather than the black northwest, where "crowds" were waiting to meet it, seems to imply a lack of serious intent on the part of the mob. The paper describes the efforts of the police and their 400-man military supplement, including the cavalry cordon, as successful in keeping the crowd moving, and mostly contained downtown. But "it was an endless task," and they had no success – if they made much attempt – in dispersal.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Fitzpatrick and Goodwin, *Guide*, 43.

African American reports provide an alternative reading: it was the efforts of the black people that kept the white mobs from rampaging through their streets and into their homes. As the *Bee* put it,

It is said that it was cavalry that kept the mob from invading South Washington and the Northwest colored section. It was the well-organized citizens who were prepared to meet all invaders; it was the determination of the black man to protect his home, his wife and his children; it was the determination of the law-abiding citizens to protect themselves, because the police authorities were powerless to protect them.¹²⁰

The people the *Post* described as “belligerent” were seen by the *Bee* as resolute and manly. Of course both depictions leave a crucial figure unexamined – the black woman. Armed black women are mentioned minimally, possibly because they disrupt the masculine narrative. White women do appear in white accounts, but only as victims, real or potential, even in items that depict them as armed and “ready for intruders.”¹²¹ Few black news reports mention white women except to note scornfully the false accusations that set off the riot. The *Bee* does, however, describe one incident and mentions others:

The mob, not seeing any colored people alight from the cars, or upon the streets in the neighborhood, then broke out and ran in the vicinity of Eleventh and K streets northwest, followed by hundreds of white women and white children, looking for some unprotected colored citizens to assault, no doubt. Similar conditions were witnessed in the vicinity of Eleventh and F, Ninth and G and Seventh and G streets.¹²²

This incident evokes not only the carnival lynchings of the south, attended by entire families, but also the image of an unrestrained populace running wild in the streets. Most

¹²⁰ “The Rights of the Black Man,” editorial, *Bee*, 8/2/19, 4.

¹²¹ “Women Arms Buyers,” *WP* 7/23/1919.

¹²² “Colored Americans’ Reward,” *Bee*, 7/26/1919.

other portrayals of the mob – and certainly all of those which appeared in white papers – tended to paint it as a masculine event, either righteously vengeful or with a holiday atmosphere. The *Bee*'s report implies a different scenario, more disturbing because apparently more all-encompassing.

There is a recurring though inconsistent idea in some accounts that the majority of rioters, and particularly the instigators of specific incidents, were young hooligans. The *Bee* sometimes used this explanation, and the *Post* wrote of “ruffians” and “hoodlums,” especially in editorials. Likewise, from the beginning the police focused on young men of both races as potential disturbers; in response to the umbrella incident on Friday night, they looked to contain young men in hopes of preventing trouble. Lieutenant Dawson of the Military Intelligence Division reported that according to his observation

most of [the] riots were caused by youngsters between the age of 14 and 18 years, both blacks and whites, who would invariably jeer at a victim or throw stones which was later taken up by older people and serious results would follow.¹²³

To some extent this description is feasible, but it cannot be taken to explain every violent outbreak, especially in light of the fact that all reporters agree that much of the fighting was instigated by military men. Granted, many of the latter would not have been much more than 18, but their status and experience substantially differentiated them from aimless teenagers looking for trouble. Further evidence against the idea of a predominance of youth in the crowds was the fact that there was so much shooting, and that none of those killed were teenagers. It may be that the large downtown mob was comprised of more youth, and the more intense and deadly fighting in neighborhoods was the work of older men – though they would not have had to be much older than 16 to be

¹²³ Dawson to Peters, 7/22/1919, MID “Negro subversion” file, 10218-350, RG 165, National Archives.

seen as adults in 1919, especially if they were not members of the elite. Furthermore, it is certainly true that the ethos of self defense among African Americans had some of its most vocal proponents among the younger generation, especially veterans. On the other hand, householders would generally have been older, as were the delegations of men who met with city officials earlier in the day. It seems unlikely that any of the action was restricted to one generational stratum, though it would have been convenient to dismiss it as an explosion of youthful energies. And of course as we have seen, some of the black rioters were from the criminal underworld, specifically (though probably not exclusively) bootleggers. With their highpowered cars and supplies of ammunition, they must have included a number of older men – and possibly some of the women.

As the *Post* story progresses through Monday night, the descriptions grow more colorful, and characterizations of the city's African Americans continue to careen around among stereotypes. The black people the paper describes veer from wild, irrational "panic" (there is a great deal of "indiscriminate" or "wild" shooting) to clear-eyed action, from acting as a mindless mob (different from the white mob downtown because so completely terrorized), to a terrifying, single-minded force acting in concert. The homogeneity is heightened in the white papers by the common practice of calling black people "negroes" (with or without a capital N), and sometimes "negresses," or by giving a person's name and noting "colored" or "negro" after it. They are never "men" or "women." Whites, on the other hand, are almost always named as men or women, usually though not always without racial designation, and police or military men are assumed to be white. Thus:

One negro, on a street car near Seventh and G streets, confronted by a mob of hooting white men, drew his

revolver and emptied it into the mob. He wounded two men with his bullets and two were cut with glass from the window through which he fired....

A few minutes later the negro, with five bullets from a policeman's revolver in his body, walked into police headquarters dripping with blood.¹²⁴

This kind of story feeds into a stock racist image: the barbaric, superhuman black marauder. The effect is magnified in the newspaper context because black people are linguistically dehumanized.¹²⁵ Further, the city's few black policemen do not appear in the riot stories, and black military men are not mentioned, though some were undoubtedly present, at least among those patrolling black neighborhoods.

The papers describe different kinds of fighting going on through the night. The *New York Times* reports that at 1:30 in the morning a car was seen speeding through the streets, its occupants randomly firing "at every white person they saw," and wounding police, soldiers and civilians before they were caught. The *Post* says that "toward midnight" blacks had commandeered eight or ten "high-powered automobiles," each of which carried a "well-armed" load of people, and "scoured the northwest." Three of these carloads were eventually captured by police. In one case the driver, Thomas Armstead, was shot and killed.¹²⁶

The *Post* also depicts black people barricaded in their homes that night, firing "indiscriminately" through "loop holes" into the street and at passing street-cars. Whether or not this sniping was actually indiscriminate, it was apparently successful as a deterrent to groups of whites who might otherwise have ventured into these areas more freely. At

¹²⁴ "Nation's Capital," WP 7/22/1919.

¹²⁵ Of course, the practice of assuming whiteness unless a different racial identity is noted continues to this day, and was not in the least anomalous at the time. The fact that the practice was common (and that it continues) does not contradict its dehumanizing effect.

¹²⁶ "Nation's Capital," WP 7/22/1919.

one of these homes, the occupants “repulsed a police raid.” At another, “a force of soldiers and policemen was organized and were preparing to lay siege to the barricaded house at an early hour.” One black man brought into the 8th Precinct managed to wrestle himself free and get ahold of an officer’s gun, though he was “quickly overpowered.” This suggests that word was also out amongst blacks about serious mistreatment in police stations.

The *Post*’s chronology is, again, unclear, and there are frequent inconsistencies in its stories. At one point the article notes that “[a]s the morning drew near, the negroes cleared gradually from the streets, the mobs weakened in strength, and the race struggle became a house to house battle,” but a few paragraphs later describes a very different predawn scenario.

Toward morning what was left of the downtown crowd had concentrated at the Treasury. After a brief struggle with the police there they forced their way through, and a mob of nearly 2,000 surged past the White House and out Pennsylvania avenue toward the negro settlement between Eighteenth and Twenty-first street, north of the avenue....A strong force of police from the Third precinct met this mob just before they reached their objectives, and it was turned back with few casualties.¹²⁷

The nature of the *Post*’s coverage makes it difficult to glean a clear timeline for the night. The stories jump around in time; deliberately or not, their chaotic arrangement evokes a sense of the night’s pandemonium. Nevertheless, it seems that for the most part the largest crowds were restricted to the area around the Mall, partly by the efforts of law enforcement and, it would seem, also due to their own preference. Smaller groups, however, were more easily able to penetrate into residential sections. This may have had

¹²⁷ Ibid.

to do with their own points of origin: if they were coming in from nearby neighborhoods or outer areas rather than originating from the large group(s) downtown, they would not have had to cross the police cordon. This suggests too that the whites attacking in residential sections may have been civilians rather than military, though the papers make no mention beyond the assertion that military men were scarce among rioters by Monday night. These kinds of questions are impossible to answer from the news articles, and their lists of wounded and arrested are somewhat helpful but not conclusive, because the wounded and arrested individuals may or may not have been representative. Other kinds of sources are similarly opaque on this score.

The *Post* lists at least eleven shootings Monday night, with three dead, two “fatally shot,” and eight seriously wounded (including one white woman).¹²⁸ Another account has four known dead by 3 a.m. Monday, seventy injured. The dead, all killed by gunfire, included Sgt. Harry Wilson; two black men – Randall Neale, who was shot after an attack on a street car, and Thomas Armstead, killed while driving a car carrying black men and women around shooting at white pedestrians – and an unidentified white man, a passenger in an auto, shot at Fifth and Massachusetts. This reporter lists a number of other shootings late Monday night/early Tuesday morning. Five of the victims were policemen, one a marine. He also notes reports of rioting near the Government Printing Office around 4 a.m. “Hundreds had been arrested for disorderly conduct or carrying concealed weapons, and in some parts of the city rioters were, from time to time, beyond control.”¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Damon Young, “Negro-White Contacts in Washington, D.C.” 138-39. Young seems to draw largely from newspapers, but apparently also had access to police and possibly court records which are by now lost or destroyed. His thesis does not cite specific sources.

Although the confrontation happened in the middle of Monday night's fighting rather than the end, the statement of James E. Scott seems an apt one with which to conclude discussion of Monday's events.

I was returning Monday, July 21, 1919 to Washington after having been out of town since Friday July 18, 1919. I arrived at the Union Station at 12: p.m.[sic] Monday Night and on entering the station noticed nothing unusual. I boarded a street car which went to Rockcreek Bridge via. New Jersey Ave. and got a transfer to the Brightwood car line. When I reached 7th & Florida Ave. N.W. the place of transfer I noticed that things were as quiet as is usually the case at that hour of the night. I waited there about five minutes for the Brightwood car and when it came I and a Captain boarded it. I walked into the car and soon noticed that I was the only member of my race present except a lady whom I noticed later but not at this time. As I started to get a vacant seat a soldier put his arm across me and said 'where are you going nigger?' I said to him that I was going to get a seat. As I was telling him that I heard some others in the car saying 'Lynch him', 'Kill him', 'Throw him out of the car window' and at that time I was being grabbed from all sides. I forced my way to the rear door and was hit by something as I stepped off, which cut my ear and bruised my head. As the car moved away the conductor fired three shots at me. It was as I got off the car that I noticed the lady on the car, what became of her I do not know.¹³⁰

Scott's experience is literally nightmarish, although he escapes. The detail of his statement and its matter-of-fact tone serve in some ways to reinforce the sense of trauma. His memory jumps around in time: "I...soon noticed that I was the only member of my race present except a lady whom I noticed later but not at this time." This sentence reveals the unreliability of memory in recounting traumatic experiences: the rememberer puts together things he noticed at different times, trying to make sense of an event which he experienced as chaotic and unintelligible. His recounting, which attempts to be

¹³⁰ NAACP Archives, D.C. Branch files, G 34, LOC.

chronological, reflects how jumbled his memory is, an effect perhaps of how disordered the actual experience was for him. He recalls, or thinks he recalls, the kinds of things one doesn't notice under normal circumstances: "I noticed that things were as quiet as is usually the case at that hour of the night." Arguably, if things in the city hadn't been so abnormal, he would not have noted any apparent normality, so perhaps his "noticing" was retrospective, or maybe he was already on alert because he was at least somewhat aware of what was happening, even though he'd been away.

NAACP field secretary James Weldon Johnson, reporting for the *Crisis* on Washington during the riot, notes general awareness of the city's condition on his train ride into the city:

As the train neared the capital I could feel the tenseness of the situation grow. It showed itself in the air of the passengers as they read the newspapers, with their glaring headlines telling of the awful night before and intimating that the worst was yet to come. As I passed through the cars on my way to the diner and back, men and women [presumably white] glanced up at me with what seemed to be a look of mild surprise; with a glance which seemed to say, 'This man must indeed have very important business in Washington.'

The porters and waiters [presumably black] plainly showed the strain under which they were doing their work – the strain of suppressed excitement with, perhaps, an added sense of dread of going into something, they knew not what. They moved about quietly, in fact, grimly and entirely without their customary good humor and gaiety. One of the porters who knew who I was questioned the wisdom of my going through with the trip. I may have felt that his question was not entirely without reason, but I did not admit it. When I left the car he said to me, 'Take good care of yourself.' I assured him that I would spare no effort to do so.¹³¹

¹³¹ James Weldon Johnson, "The Riots: An NAACP Investigation," *Crisis* (Sept. 1919), 241.

Though Johnson arrived in the city the next day (Tuesday), it seems likely that on Monday Scott would have likewise somehow been apprised of the situation. Because he doesn't say whether he was aware of the danger before he was attacked, we are left to wonder whether he was always so watchful or if these were special circumstances for him. Seventh and Florida, NW, is in the black neighborhood some twenty blocks north of the Mall, on the edge of Ledroit Park. It is very close to Howard University and to the black strip on U Street, so Scott does not seem to have been taking any chances in being there. Given that African Americans were at times shooting at streetcars in their neighborhoods, white passengers were probably extremely edgy, and Scott, perhaps ignorant of this particular fact, may have unknowingly provoked the attack simply by appearing on the car.

Even if we were to question some specifics of Scott's description, it seems reflective of what many victims in D.C. went through, their world suddenly thrown into chaos because they happened into the path of a mob determined to attack anyone with dark skin. Perhaps Scott got away because despite their words the streetcar riders were not actually determined to kill him, or maybe it was because his resistance took them by surprise, as often happens when victims fight back. Or perhaps he leaves something out here, and he somehow actively provoked the attack and was therefore ready to run. He would not be likely or encouraged to admit it in an affidavit such as this if he had an active role in the conflict. Moreover, provoking such a fight would have been an extremely reckless thing to do, which makes it unlikely though not impossible.

We are left wondering, with Scott, what became of the black woman he saw as he made his escape. Anything was possible. Though I have found no reports that seem to

pertain specifically to her, the *Bee* said more than once that “Colored women were taken from street cars and assaulted....” It is possible that Scott’s attackers turned on her once he had escaped. Like the praying black women on the car when Francis Thomas was beaten on Sunday, this woman disappears into the general violence. Her sex cannot be assumed to have saved her. Regardless of class or age, black women, like poor and working class white women, were not generally included in the category of femininity which entailed white male protection – or even courtesy. As the *Bee* put it, “No respectable colored person was safe upon the streets.”¹³² The speed with which Scott saw the mood of the car move to murder, and the absence of visible dissent against the attack, show that on Monday night even where things seemed quiet, the specter of violence was present, waiting to explode.

Tuesday, July 22

On Tuesday, public spaces such as movie theaters, pool halls, and near-beer saloons in black neighborhoods and some in the downtown area closed early. Many more troops were on the streets (in official crowd control capacity rather than as rioters). There was increasing governmental activity, with congressmen calling for martial law and for investigations, and with President Wilson finally responding visibly to the crisis. Black lawyers – among them NAACP Legal Committee members like James Cobb, William Houston, Royal Hughes, but also including Messrs. Kendrick, Wilkinson, Gaskin, and Garner – were busy in the courts during the day, fighting what they saw as unfair penalties on African Americans arrested during the fighting. Municipal Court Judge Robert Terrell, the city’s first black judge, seems to have been at work behind the scenes

¹³² If the *Bee* saw itself as speaking primarily for the “respectable” – i.e. the middle class – then such remarks could imply that others faced at least the same degree of danger.

on these cases as well.¹³³ Hospitals remained crowded. As on previous days, there was sporadic fighting over the course of the day, but things got more dangerous after dark. Though overall numbers were smaller and encounters were less intense than the previous day, there were more shootings Tuesday night. A heavy rain dispersed most people from the streets sometime in the late evening, though episodes continued through the night.

On Tuesday, the president came into the picture, meeting with his Secretary of War Newton Baker. Some 2000 troops from the various services were assigned to the task of containing the riot under Maj. Gen. W.G. Haan, just returned from overseas.¹³⁴ In addition to troops in uniform, Military Intelligence men were dispatched in plain clothes around the city to gather information “and telephone it immediately to Police Headquarters.”¹³⁵ Troops were stationed near trouble areas in order to be ready to respond quickly to any outbreaks.

Meanwhile, Congress officially acknowledged the breakdown of law and order in the capital. Three measures to address the situation were introduced in the House. Though a bill introduced by Congressman Emerson of Ohio did call on the President to establish martial law – which he never did – and Hill of New York wanted a restriction on firearms sales in D.C., no congressional action provided the city with “immediate relief.”¹³⁶

Also on Tuesday, the NAACP sent a telegram of protest to the President:

¹³³ Thomas to Grimke, A. Grimke Papers, NAACP Correspondence, box 39-28, folder 561, MSRC.

¹³⁴ “One Dead and Another Dying, Shot by Negro,” WP 7/23. Nowhere in the white papers’ discussion of the mobilization of the military is there any mention of the idea that the city’s African Americans might have had questions about the very men who had been at the center of the rampage for the last few days being now delegated to contain the violence.

¹³⁵ Young, “Negro-White Contacts,” 148.

¹³⁶ The third measure, offered by Clark of Florida, “asked for an investigation into the prevalence of crime in Washington.” (Abernethy, p. 320, n 48)

In the name of 12,000,000 negroes of the United States, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People respectfully calls your attention to the shame put upon the country by the mobs, including United States soldiers, sailors and marines, which have assaulted innocent and unoffending negroes in the National Capital.

Men in uniform have attacked negroes on the streets and pulled them from street cars to beat them. Crowds are reported by the New York Times to have directed attacks against any passing negro by cries of 'There he goes.'

The effect of such riots in the National Capital upon race antagonism will be to increase bitterness and danger of outbreaks elsewhere. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People calls upon you as President and commander-in-chief of the armed forces of the nation to make a statement condemning mob violence and to enforce such military law as situation demands.¹³⁷

The telegram was distributed to NAACP members and to newspapers, many of which reprinted it, in part or in full.¹³⁸ The writers emphasize for a national audience specific aspects of the rioting: mobs included military men, often in uniform; streetcars were a frequent site of violence; the city was so chaotic and dangerous that any passing black person could be set upon. They also assert a direct causal connection between events in the National Capital and racial antagonism and violence elsewhere in the nation.¹³⁹ NAACP officers had been working on government officials since Sunday's letter to Secretary Daniels. Further indication of how serious events in Washington looked might be seen in the fact that both W.E.B. Du Bois and Joel Spingarn sent telegrams to the local branch indicating their willingness to come immediately "if their services were

¹³⁷ WP, 7/23/1919.

¹³⁸ For instance: "Negroes Call on Wilson To Act on Mob Violence; Fear Outbreaks Elsewhere," WP 7/23/19.

¹³⁹ President Wilson would not speak publicly about mob violence for weeks, and even then his comments were relatively mild given the amount of violence the nation had seen.

necessary.”¹⁴⁰ Meanwhile, NAACP members were busy gathering statements from eyewitnesses for Seligmann, while Field Secretary James Weldon Johnson was en route.

Between them, on Tuesday Police Court Judges Hardison and McMahon heard 23 cases of carrying deadly weapons and almost 100 of disorderly conduct. Of the former, five were convicted; of the latter, 65.¹⁴¹ The judges imposed the maximum penalty in each conviction. Members of the NAACP Legal Committee were in court, as were crowds of black spectators, “who packed every available inch in the court rooms,” according to the *Post*. The lawyers as well as the spectators were vocal in decrying the unequal treatment of black and white prisoners. According to the *Bee*, the attorneys

made an energetic protest against the arresting of so many colored men while the white men from whom they were attempting to protect themselves were not molested.¹⁴²

The *Post* mentions that the black attorneys requested and received a conference with Judge McMahon, from which the public was excluded at the attorneys’ request. “It was intimated, however, that in addition to protesting against the increase in bonds, the lawyers charged the court with discriminating between white and colored prisoners.”¹⁴³

The racial disparity in arrests and prosecutions was an ongoing issue, and its outcome is further evidence of the capital’s racial schizophrenia. In the end, surprisingly, the organization’s lawyers succeeded in overturning the majority of the sentences and fines on African Americans, though not without a protracted fight. In some ways the need for the fight demonstrates a predictable level of racial discrimination among the city’s policemen; but the black lawyers’ success shows that the city was atypical in the

¹⁴⁰ “Letter to Members,” NAACP Files, G34, LOC.

¹⁴¹ “Rioters in Courts,” WP 7/23/1919.

¹⁴² “Letter to Members,” NAACP Files, G34, LOC.

¹⁴³ “Rioters in Courts,” WP 7/23/1919.

possibility – indeed, the expectation – of redress in the courts for its black citizens. It also demonstrates the determination of the city’s black professionals and institutions in their willingness to fund and fight these legal battles, against considerable odds.

Even as federal authorities were moving into action, the violence continued. As the *Post* put it, “Despite the stern repressive measures of the military authorities, the smouldering race feeling blazed into action here and there throughout the city.” There were scattered confrontations, mostly in the northwest, during the day. According to Damon Young, it was midday on Tuesday when the “retaliatory spirit” among African Americans began to manifest (though by Young’s own account Thomas Armstead and six other men and women were driving around and shooting at whites the night before). In any case, on Rhode Island Avenue between Ninth and Tenth, a group of 25 or 30 black men was reported to be throwing stones and yelling at passing cars. A white man was found in the freight yards with a bullet in his head, alive. Apparently he had been shot in a “general altercation at Seventh street and Florida avenue.”¹⁴⁴

There were other shootings and beatings over the course of the day. In one instance a black man was knocked off his bicycle in front of the public library and immediately surrounded by a white crowd yelling “Lynch him! Who got the rope!” He was somehow rescued by policemen and soldiers, “who had to charge the crowd,” and then brought to a police station.¹⁴⁵ The papers reported hundreds of people in the hospitals, some of whom had been collected by police after waiting for hours without treatment. Arms dealers in nearby Alexandria, Virginia, were instructed by officials not to sell to African Americans, a directive with which they complied, even as they freely

¹⁴⁴ “One Dead and Another Dying, Shot by Negro,” WP 7/23/1919.

¹⁴⁵ Young, “Negro-White Contacts,” 141.

sold to whites, including women. The *Post* carried a story Wednesday about two African American boys who were arrested there for attempting to buy ammunition, apparently at the behest of others.¹⁴⁶

As on previous days, Tuesday's real fighting started after dark. The shooting of two members of the Home Defense League received particular attention in the white papers. The *Post* recapitulated this story several times, including headlines, in one article. As he left a streetcar on the corner of Ninth and M, a black man was approached by two "Home Defense Officers," Isaac Halbfinger and Benny Belmont, who were not wearing uniforms or any identifying insignia. As the *Post* told it,

According to eyewitnesses, the negro alighted from a car at Ninth and M streets, and was approached by both special officers. When only several feet away, the negro fired two shots at the men. One of the bullets struck Halbfinger, piercing his heart, while the other went wild. Belmont grappled with the negro, who shot him in the left breast near the heart.

Attorney William Houston, in his report to the NAACP, tells the story a little differently:

A colored man returning from his work at 11:30 o'clock peaceably, in full observance of the law, alighted from a street car at the corner of 9th and "M" streets to go to his home. No sooner had he left the car than two white men claiming to be members of the Home Defense League with police commissions, but dressed in plain clothes, roughly accosted him and started to offer him violence. The colored man promptly drew his revolver and in self-defense killed one of the men out-right and severely wounded the other, who is now in the hospital with slight chances of recovery.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ "Women Arms Buyers," WP 7/23/1919.

¹⁴⁷ NAACP files, G34, LOC.

Houston goes on to point out that in his discussion of this “tragedy” with Commissioner Brownlow, he asked why Halbfinger and Belmont were commissioned when he and his cohorts had been told the day before that the police could not deputize civilians.

Brownlow answered that the two “were acting under the authority of their commissions issued a long while ago, and that no new commissions had been issued to any civilians during the present emergencies.” Houston does not offer a comment in his report on the plausibility of this answer, and indeed, Brownlow’s assertion is as impossible to investigate now as it was in the moment.

The Home Defense League had first been formed in early 1917 by officials of the Municipal Police Department. They placed the organization under civilian control in May of that year. The League was a volunteer police auxiliary, “a second line of defense,”¹⁴⁸ intended “to maintain order” in the city until the war ended. Like other such organizations, one of its primary mandates was to “keep watch on aliens,”¹⁴⁹ and its wartime function was extended after Armistice. It had an office in the Municipal building and in addition to serving as a volunteer militia for the city, in February of 1919 its members were empowered to perform various police functions, including arrest.¹⁵⁰ The justification for this was the police department’s chronic lack of funding, which meant that the force was not only insufficient in numbers, but significantly underpaid. Volunteers willing to patrol without pay were a welcome expedient, especially at a time when Washingtonians, like other Americans, were fearful not only of criminals but of the violent political subversives they believed to be in their midst.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ “Eno Now Heads Home Defense,” WP 5/17/1917

¹⁴⁹ “Home Guard Organized,” WP 4/8/1917.

¹⁵⁰ “Home Defense a Real Police,” WP 2/20/1919.

¹⁵¹ For more on such organizations, see Murray, *Red Scare*; Richard Gid Powers, *Secrecy and Power*.

Members of the Home Defense League were active participants in the riot. Acting both in their semi-official capacity and as civilian rioters, individuals identified in the papers as “home defense men” had been involved in a number of confrontations since Saturday. One of them shot and killed Randall Neale on Monday night.¹⁵² To an African American man, Halbfinger and Belmont would have been inherently threatening, even – perhaps especially – if they had identified themselves as “officers.” Furthermore, it is easy to argue that on that day any black man in Washington approached by two white men, in or out of uniform, could reasonably assume that he was in danger. Houston avers that Halbfinger and Belmont “roughly accosted [the man] and started to offer him violence,” which is a very different characterization of the prelude to the shooting than that offered by the *Post*, which has them “several feet away” when the first shots were fired. Houston does not mention the name of the shooter, or the source of his account, and in the *Post* account the man escapes. It is not clear in either case who actually witnessed and recounted the event.

In his August follow-up report, Walter Loving tells an interesting story about Tuesday night that was still circulating among the city’s African Americans weeks later. Though Loving “reports it as a mere rumor,” he hints that there are aspect not entirely unlikely.

It is rumored, and the rumor is general among the colored people of Washington, that Congressman J.W. Ragsdale of South Carolina made the following statement in the cloak room of the House of Representatives Tuesday afternoon, July 22:- “I will go down and show these white folks how we handle ‘niggers’ down south.” The colored people claim that Congressman Ragsdale was mortally wounded while leading a gang of rioters on Pennsylvania Avenue on the night of July 22nd, and was taken to the office of a

¹⁵² “Nation’s Capital,” WP 7/22/1919.

physician where he died on Wednesday, July 23rd. The daily papers in announcing the death of Congressman Ragsdale said that he left the Capitol Wednesday during session to go to see his physician, and died suddenly at the home of his physician. It is peculiar how the colored people recognized Congressman Ragsdale during such an exciting evening, and it is also strikingly peculiar that the daily papers announced that the Congressman left the Capitol during session to go to the home of his physician on Wednesday when the Congressional Record of that day and date...does not register that gentleman present....¹⁵³

Loving says that he is reporting the rumor “to show that there are conflicting statements on facts,” and clearly he is, as always, trying to give his superiors an accurate picture. Does his use of the phrase “strikingly peculiar” imply his disbelief of the official account of Ragsdale’s death? He clearly finds that story more peculiar than the idea that African Americans would have recognized the congressman on the street. Though it is impossible to verify the cause of Ragsdale’s death, or the source of the rumors, the story is suggestive. It is not impossible that an African American working in the cloakroom could have heard Ragsdale declare his intention to join the fray. As for his recognizability, J.W. Ragsdale had been in the House for six years, was “prominent in house [sic] debates,” and was on the District of Columbia Committee. The *Post* in 1915 called him “one of the most aggressive of the so-called insurgent Democrats”; he had made himself notable for vociferously disagreeing with the president. All of this could mean that Washingtonians would have known him, especially if they worked in the Capitol. Ragsdale was a lawyer who had served in the South Carolina legislature before his election to Congress. He was 47 years old, and according to newspaper accounts, had been seeing his doctor regularly for “treatments” for a heart condition. “Mr. Ragsdale

¹⁵³ Loving, “Conditions Among Negroes in Washington,” report to Director of Military Intelligence, 8/10/1919, “Negro Subversion” file, 10218-350, RG 165, National Archives.

realized after reaching his physician's office that death was near, it is believed, for he turned to his physician and asked him to hold his hand and in a few minutes the representative was dead." In some ways this reads more like the last moments of a man injured in battle than one making a regular visit to his doctor; the report mentions that he had been in the House the day before, "apparently in good health."¹⁵⁴ It is all speculation, of course, and in the end perhaps it matters less whether the congressman was actually among the rioters and killed as a consequence, than that African Americans in Washington believed that he was. The story seems to show too that among rioters of both races there were men of the upper as well as lower classes.

James Weldon Johnson, field secretary of the NAACP, arrived in Washington on Tuesday in the early evening. He witnessed visible tension and even received an explicit warning about the situation during his train ride down, but was unsure what he would find. Black people in the northwest appeared to him calm, determined, but also taut. "Wild rumors had been circulating all day foreboding terrible things; and these things, whatever they might be, the colored people had made up their minds to meet."¹⁵⁵ Having expected a "panicky, excited" atmosphere, Johnson was surprised and clearly impressed.

Dr. Evelyn Mitchell and a group of other "prominent" white Washingtonians issued a statement which appeared on Tuesday in the *Post* urging calm and reminding Washingtonians of their responsibility as citizens "to set an example of moderation and justice in dealing with offenders against the law" – in other words, not to participate in the extralegal ritual of lynching.¹⁵⁶ A letter from Dr. Mitchell would appear in *The Nation*

¹⁵⁴ "Views of Capital Visitors on Interesting Current Topics," WP, 10/13/1915; "Rep. Ragsdale Dies Suddenly in Doctor's Office," Atlanta *Constitution*, 7/24/1919.

¹⁵⁵ James Weldon Johnson, "The Riots," *Crisis*, September 1919, 241.

¹⁵⁶ "Let the Public Be Calm To End Race Riots, Urge Citizens in Statement," WP 7/23/1919.

magazine in early August, telling of her decision on Tuesday night to go into Ledroit Park, a middle class black neighborhood in the northwest, in order to see for herself what was happening. She found black men on the streets, armed and expecting a white mob, determined to fight such a mob off or die in the attempt. A central point of her letter was that she was able to venture unmolested into this neighborhood and actually have detailed conversations with inhabitants whom she described as frightened, but determined to protect themselves. Furthermore, she actively refuted the mainstream depictions of armed black men:

I met them – not savages, not red-handed murderers, but citizens, hunted and terrified, looking more or less hopelessly to their Government for aid; human beings craving the hand of brotherhood, and cut to the very heart.¹⁵⁷

Mitchell was a member of the NAACP, an activist who had considered going to Serbia to help in the aftermath of war, but was convinced by the riot that her duty lay at home. “I believe that our country needs all of us who are standing along the color line.”¹⁵⁸ In Tuesday’s group statement she and her fellows explicitly contradicted the mob’s rationale:

...[F]ar from preventing or avenging attacks upon womanhood, the riots in Washington have resolved themselves into irresponsible acts of aggression upon innocent people. Mob violence discredits our government and our institutions.

Citizens who are concerned for the good name of their city and of their country are urged to discount exaggerated rumors of crime, and the press is urged to cooperate in moderating the inflamed state of the public mind.

The capital city naturally has a particular responsibility to set an example of moderation and justice in dealing with offenders against the law. The public should remember that

¹⁵⁷ E.G.M., “Letter to the Editor,” *Nation*, v 109, no 2823, (8/9/19), 173..

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

crime is individual, and the law must be impartial. No one is safe unless all are safe.¹⁵⁹

The statement's call to Washingtonians to consider how they might appear in the eyes of the country and of the world was typical for the capital, as was the idea of the city's natural responsibility to set an example of proper conduct. The other signers – who included “Mr. and Mrs. Louis F. Post, Miss Julia Lathrop, Mr. and Mrs. Edward P. Costigan, Miss Grace Abbott, Miss Jessie R. Haver and Miss Caroline Fleming” – were local progressives, like Mitchell. The statement echoes with characteristic progressive concepts – citizenship, responsibility, the public, moderation and justice, crime. The fact that so many of the signers were women may have been intended to give weight to the assertion that the rioters' actions would not protect or avenge attacks on women. The lecturing tone is also rather typical of contemporary progressives, reflecting class-based assumptions and expectations of their own role as teachers and leaders of the less fortunate.

Mitchell's testimony to the *Nation*¹⁶⁰ is important not simply because she offers a unique and detailed picture of what was happening in at least one section of the city on the last night of rioting. Her story, and the statement she signed, are crucial because they introduce to the picture a less immediately visible group within the city, whose presence disrupts the racial binary in a more complicated way than by simply injecting class. The presence and influence of these white progressives may account for some of the seemingly anomalous happenings and outcomes of the riot, such as the eventual vindication of Carrie Johnson, the freeing and/or lightening of sentences and fines on

¹⁵⁹ “Let the Public Be Calm,” WP 7/23/1919.

¹⁶⁰ Examined more closely in the next chapter.

many of the black men arrested in connection with the riot, and the failure of several attempts at instituting repressive measures in the wake of the riot, such as a proposal for jim crow street cars.

In addition to a number of fights on and around streetcars, there were a variety of other clashes Tuesday night. In one, a group of black men was chased by cavalry into an alley near Seventh and M. One “refused to give way.” Drawing his gun, he shot at one of the cavalymen and was shot and wounded in turn.¹⁶¹ At another point a large mob of whites, possibly more than 2000, gathered and began moving toward the black northwest, but the combination of mounted troops and heavy rain showers dispersed them. But through the night the sporadic rain, combined with the large military presence and the ongoing black patrols kept the violence to a minimum. By morning the riot was all but over.

Wednesday, July 23

There was almost no fighting on Wednesday. Fewer troops patrolled the streets. The *Post* assured its readers that the majority of those on duty were being held in reserve at various “strategic points throughout the city...ready for instant response to a call for help from any danger point.” The shooting of the Home Defense men the previous night – and probably the demands by black leaders to know why those forces were deputized and on patrol when the same privilege had been denied to black men – had also resulted in those forces being withdrawn from official duties. Most of the patrolling on Wednesday night, then, was left to uniformed police officers.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Young, “Negro-White Contacts,” 144.

¹⁶² “One Riot Victim Dies; Troops Quiet Capital; Crowds Quit Streets,” WP 7/24/1919.

Although movie theaters, saloons and pool-halls in black neighborhoods remained closed, and other businesses such as drugstores and restaurants were largely empty, the *Post* reports that during the day on Wednesday much of the city was back to “normal.” Police were on heavy patrol, however, which meant that individuals

in the streets, in public buildings, and on street cars were held up and given the rapid ‘once over,’ by means of which the trained policemen can detect the presence of a gun or knife by a few passes of the hands.¹⁶³

Police, here depicted as highly trained and skillful rather than hapless and overwhelmed, arrested six people as the result of these searches, but only one for carrying a concealed weapon. The others were taken in for disorderly conduct. The *Post* does not note the race of the arrestees, which means that they were white.

The newspaper coverage of July 23rd is for the most part aftermath. There are various statements by police and military authorities, including the Secretary of War, that the worst is over, and the kinds of incidents it reports are relatively minor, dispersed around the city, and not involving large numbers of people. Bursts of sensationalism appear in the papers, especially in headlines, but they are not generally borne out in the body of the text. Depicting a return to normalcy, Thursday’s *Post* says that early on Wednesday evening there was the “usual crowd of sightseers” in the downtown area around the Mall, noting that families came out in their autos “to see what was going on. They found no excitement and by the time the theaters were out the downtown section was practically deserted.” Clearly these white families knew it was safe enough to venture forth, even if they were coming with a prurient hope to “see something.”¹⁶⁴ One

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

wonders whether or to what extent sightseeing had been a part of the scene on previous nights.

Not surprisingly, the *Post* describes black neighborhoods rather differently. While Johnson found them taut, the paper describes them as “subnormal.” As noted, theaters in those areas were closed, as were near-beer saloons and pool halls, and on any given street, apparently, one would see residents “loitering in doorways to get the benefit of the slight breeze, or leaning from windows,” but not out and about. The city’s African Americans were staying close to home, hopeful of calm but watching for danger.

During the day on Wednesday, James Weldon Johnson and Herbert Seligmann met with Chief Pullman. While they were there, a committee of African American men arrived, accompanied by Captain Doyle of the Eighth Precinct. They were asking once again that Pullman swear in black men as Special Officers “to aid in preserving law and order.” Seligmann and Johnson joined in this call, but Pullman was openly reluctant, referring the question once again to Commissioner Brownlow. In a later meeting, Brownlow refused. Johnson is silent as to the reasons Brownlow gave, or his general attitude.¹⁶⁵

Before, during, and after the riot, the *Washington Post* was full of half-stories. Headlines and opening sentences frequently implied much more serious incidents than the full articles ever described, and the articles were often quite incomplete, leaving far too much to the active imaginations of their readers. The implied, the shared subterranean, the archetypal stories, the lynching script – these were what readers used to fill in the blanks. This was exactly what started the riot, though not what caused it, and we see even in stories from the aftermath the paper’s reluctance to let go of the template.

¹⁶⁵ Johnson, “The Riots,” *Crisis*, September 1919, 242.

While for the most part the violence had subsided by Wednesday, there were a few incidents. Though public amusements in black neighborhoods were closed, the same was not true in white sections. Around 10:30 in the evening, Mrs. Emmet Brennan, a 30 year old white woman, and her brother, Edward Toomey, a discharged Canadian soldier, were returning to her home in the southeast from the theater.

At Sixteenth and A streets they encountered a group of some thirty negro men and women, ranging the street, singing in chords. Mrs. Brennan says that she and her brother were halted by an outburst of profane and scurrilous language. While they sought in vain for a way to escape[,] one of the negroes, Mrs. Brennan said, advanced from the crowd, and fired two shots from [a] revolver. Mrs. Brennan and her brother broke away from the negro throng and fled to her home, where they barricaded themselves in and telephoned to police headquarters.¹⁶⁶

This is in part another instance of the newspaper being provocative, broadcasting – and thereby conceivably exacerbating – white hysteria. There are several provocative and unelaborated images and pieces of information in this article. The image of the group of men and women “ranging the street, singing in chords” is potent and unexplained. Were they celebrating or looking for trouble? The fact that they were singing might lead one to think the former, though the reality could well have been more complicated.

In an exceedingly melodramatic description of the riot that appeared in the September issue of the *Messenger*, a magazine published by the African American socialists A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, a black Washingtonian named W.E. Hawkins offers a possible explanation. Having described African Americans in the city as reacting decisively, bloodily, and with a kind of madness to the would-be lynchers

¹⁶⁶ “Riot Victim,” WP, 7/24/1919.

who began the riot, Hawkins says that, with “pride and jubilation” at having fought off the lynchers,

groups of Negroes roamed the streets shouting jubilant war songs as if it were a carnival and gala day. And to them it was a carnival indeed, in which the sleeping Demon of Race Consciousness, aroused to fury by the constant pricking of his pride, sensed the flavor of the glory of hate and dropped the sting of death into the white man’s cup of arrogance.¹⁶⁷

It is possible that the couple encountered a group like this and were in real danger, though Hawkins’ story generally seems overblown. The encounter could also have been more of a prank, with the black crowd meaning no actual harm but rather to make fun of or perhaps frighten the white pair for their own amusement. Or the white pair could have taken it upon themselves to correct the obstreperous behavior of a group of blacks – many white people were accustomed to freely ordering black people around – and then found themselves not only defied but threatened. This would especially make sense if in their account to the police the two had exaggerated the number of people in the “crowd.” If the group they encountered was smaller than they said, it might explain their willingness to confront the singers in the first place. Because of the *Post*’s habit of exaggerating the threat presented by African Americans before as well as during the riot, one might have an impulse to be dismissive of Brennen’s complaint. But Hawkins is, if anything, more lurid by far than the *Post*, and he describes groups of black people roaming the streets singing, essentially with blood in their eyes, so perhaps this encounter was as volatile as the paper said.

In another, similar report, the paper tells a story fit for a movie script. Around midnight, a white auto mechanic pulled between two cars “loaded with negroes” at

¹⁶⁷ W.E. Hawkins, “When Negroes Shot a Lynching Bee into Perdition,” *Messenger*, September 1919, 28.

Thomas Circle on Fourteenth street. As he passed between the cars, he was shot at once from each side, but, like Mrs. Brennan and her brother on Sixteenth Street, not hit. The shooters turned onto Rhode Island Avenue and went east “at high speed.” The mechanic called the police once he got home, and on hearing the report

Gen. Haan ordered every available police car out to intercept the raiders and run them down. From every precinct in the northwest detectives and soldiers in automobiles and side cars started on a wild race through the residence section.

In addition to police cars and motorcycles, there were also “upward of 50 automobiles furnished by the Home Defense League”¹⁶⁸ involved in this chase. One is left to assume that since the Home Defense men had been demobilized, their cars were occupied by actual police personnel. There is no mention of the outcome of this chase. As we have seen, a variety of sources confirm that black rioters were definitely using cars in their patrols and in whatever marauding some of them were engaged in, so the story is altogether feasible.

The paper does note elsewhere in the same issue, in an item titled “*Auto Patrol of Citizens Valuable to Quell Riots*” that police were making use of dozens of cars loaned by private citizens for patrols. Major Pullman, the police superintendent, said that the patrols were doing “great work” and that “[t]hey constitute[d] a splendid flying squadron and ha[d] had much to do, I believe, with lessening the number of brawls and shootings on the streets.”¹⁶⁹ The title of the piece reads as though citizens were doing the actual patrolling, but according to the text, it was police staffing the cars, which were loaned by

¹⁶⁸ “Riot Victim,” WP 7/24/1919. .

¹⁶⁹ “Auto Patrol of Citizens Valuable to Quell Riots,” WP 7/24/1919.

citizens for that purpose. The piece ends with a note that the need for these loaner cars will continue for at least another week.

The *Post* reports no other major violence for Wednesday night. The main point of focus for the article other than the two isolated shooting incidents and General Haan's belief that the serious trouble is over, is the death of Louis Havlicek, the marine who was shot by the medical student and Treasury Department messenger Micajah Walker on Monday night. Though his death is noted in a headline, the actual details do not appear until well into the article, on an inside page. The headline for the section reads, in bold print, "Faces Charge of Murder." The next sentence contradicts the headline, however:

A charge of *manslaughter* immediately was lodged against Theodore Micajah Walker, a negro messenger in the Treasury Department, by the police of the Third precinct. [italics added]¹⁷⁰

The story of this shooting is not particularly sensationalized, especially when compared to other reports:

Walker...was on his way to night work on a motor bicycle, according to his story, and rode into a crowd on Pennsylvania avenue near Riggs Bank. He declared he was struck on the head by some one and showed a laceration as evidence, and admitted, the police say, that he discharged a revolver, aiming low, and in a way which he believed would not result in injury to any one. Havlicek was standing on a Capital Traction loading platform and the bullet struck him in the neck. Thompson [sic] was arrested by Private J.T. Langley, of the Third precinct, after a chase and a wrestling match.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ "Riot Victim," WP 7/24/1919.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

Reports of the shooting in Tuesday's and Wednesday's *Post* were incomplete and got some of the details – such as the suspect's name – wrong. Thursday's version of the story is the most complete and also the most measured, telling the shooter's side of the story and depicting the injury as an accident rather than attempted murder. Leaving the sensationalism in the headlines, the actual story reports the outcome relatively soberly. This may simply be due to the fact that Walker was obviously well-connected. He was a government employee, which indicates standing; in addition, he was a medical student – though the *Post* story leaves out that detail. Walker's treatment by the police, the courts, and the *Post* was remarkably fair given the fact that he killed a marine, and seems best explained by his class position.¹⁷²

As it had done on each of the preceding days, Thursday's paper also reported on what happened Wednesday in police court regarding riot cases. There were only 11 riot cases before the police court on Wednesday, relatively few compared to the previous days, and especially compared to Tuesday, when the court heard over a hundred such cases. Police court was different Wednesday too in that there were almost no black spectators that day. They had moved to “the United States branch of the court where the cases of carrying concealed weapons were being called.”¹⁷³ As we have seen African American lawyers had been assiduously fighting riot cases since Monday morning. Their activity is in a way emblematic of the black city's response to white violence, showing at once its strong institutional and professional infrastructure, its widespread sense of civil

¹⁷² Neval Thomas' letter to Grimke notes that Walker was a medical student. A letter from S.M. Kendrick to Grimke also states that Walker's lawyer, like Carrie Johnson's, has refused “any help in the form of charity at all.” (A. Grimke NAACP correspondence, MSRC, box 39-28, folder 561).

¹⁷³ “Hears 11 Riot Cases,” WP 7/24/1919.

rights entitlement, and its relatively unified and generally uncompromising response to the riot.

Thursday, July 24/Friday, July 25

Thursday was quiet, and Friday's paper, like Thursday's, contained mostly aftermath reporting, some analysis, and related incidents. Despite reports of a police search "for an automobile full of heavily armed negroes who were reported to be on raids in the northeastern section of the city,"¹⁷⁴ the riot was over. The city (including national representatives living there) went about the business of picking up the pieces and trying to figure out what had happened. James Weldon Johnson met with several senators, and with the editor of the *Washington Post*.

When I handed the city editor my card, he appeared glad to see me. He seemed to be under the impression that I had come down from New York for the express purpose of telling the colored people in Washington to be 'good.' He called a reporter and asked me to tell him what the Association was doing and proposed to do in the matter....I lost no time in telling him that the organization which I represented stood for law and order; that all the fights it had made in behalf of the colored people had been made through and under the law; but that my reason for calling on him was not to discuss that phase of the situation. I then proceeded to tell him frankly and directly how responsible were the *Washington Post* and the other Washington dailies for what had taken place.... I talked with him for, perhaps, half an hour. During the whole time he stood as one struck dumb; at least, he answered not a word. I realized that the man was scared through and through. He asked me before I left if I thought the riots were over. I told him I thought they were, unless the whites again took the aggressive. I was surprised to see that the *Post* published some of the things I had said.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ "Autoload of Negroes on Raid in Northeast Shoot at Lieut. Higgins," WP 7/25/1919.

¹⁷⁵ Johnson, "The Riots," *Crisis*, Sept. 1919, 243

The next day Johnson paid similar visits to the editors of other local white dailies. The editor's astonishment at Johnson's (and his organization's) calling him to account, like his initial expectation that the leader had appeared in order to offer reassurance, should not be surprising. The paper's riot coverage had demonstrated repeatedly its racial orientation, its utter disregard for the situation – of the very subjectivity – of African Americans, in the city and elsewhere. This was entirely typical for the time and must be understood as in keeping with the status quo which so many African Americans were challenging more and more openly in this period. The white daily papers' responsibility for what happened in the city cannot be accurately measured, but it seems clear that it was substantial, and the NAACP's decision to confront them is further indication of the organization's approach in dealing with powerful national institutions.

In a further demonstration of that strategy, on Friday NAACP Secretary John Shillady sent a letter to U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer asking him if he intended “proceedings against the Washington Post, on the grounds of incitement to riot,” citing and quoting in full the “Mobilization for Tonight” item that had appeared on the front page of Monday's paper (see page 21 of this chapter). Shillady's letter closes with a question:

In view of the fact that the ‘mobilization’ announced by the Washington Post had not been ordered by any authority, military or civil, does not the passage show intent by the Washington Post to bring about such ‘mobilization?’¹⁷⁶

A few days later he received a response from an attorney at the Justice Department stating that the Department did not “regard the article...as warranting judicial proceedings either civil or criminal.” Of course it is unlikely that the Association actually

¹⁷⁶ Shillady to Palmer, 7/25/19. NAACP files, G34, LOC.

expected a prosecution, but sent the letter in order to make a point, publicly – a copy of the letter to Palmer went out to the papers with a press release, and in his discussion of the riots in the *New Republic* in mid August, Herbert Seligmann would emphasize the item's egregiousness (see Chapter 5). This attack was not just aimed at the *Post*; it was a skirmish with the Justice Department as well.¹⁷⁷

Internally, there was discussion among NAACP attorneys and officials about

getting some sort of action in regard to the police officers who beat up colored prisoners, arrested them when they should have arrested the other fellow, etc. What we want to do is something which will make that sort of thing unhealthy, not only now, but right along.¹⁷⁸

The riot provided opportunities for black citizens to publicize and combat institutionalized inequalities which were most dramatically demonstrated in the Washington riot by police mistreatment of citizens who were in many cases arguably riot victims. The statement that organization lawyers were plotting to make such police behavior “unhealthy...right along” is a good example of the legal and political nature of NAACP strategizing. This note was enclosed with a copy of the “Notice to Members” the D.C. branch sent out that day. Kendrick also says that the notice was to “get the facts to the people. We consider this our big chance.” The organization was making hay as it could. Kendrick notes a “remarkable spirit of unity among colored people,” and mentions the mutual cooperation and support of other, sometimes antagonistic, black organizations.

In his own letter to Grimke a few days later, Neval Thomas mentions that “a number of people are taking up collections” for the defense of people arrested during the

¹⁷⁷ The NAACP would of course intensify its legal attacks on institutional racism over the next few decades, with well-known results.

¹⁷⁸ S.M. Kendrick to A. Grimke, 7/25/1919, MSRC A. Grimke papers, NAACP corresp., Box 39-28, folder 561.

riots. He also notes that “the people are very angry” with certain black leaders (Waldron and Tanner, specifically) who had gone around neighborhoods telling black people to stay off the streets during the days of the riot. According to his account, people saw these calls as “todying [sic] to the white people.” A majority of black Washingtonians seem to have felt that the actions of those who patrolled and fought in the streets were called for, and even necessary.

It was a demonstration of the new appraisalment the Negro has of human values. Life to him is valued only in so far as he can use that life to secure and maintain that which makes life dear, and the lives of those who jeopardize his sacred heritages lose their value in proportion as they antagonize those heritages. Therefore, when policemen failed to protect the Negroes, the latter shot them down.

Though the last sentence may be an exaggeration, the writer makes use of the fact that a number of policemen were shot to make his point. Black people connected the inadequate response of the police in Washington not only to their need to take responsibility for their own safety but to the idea that the police were not there to protect them, and could in fact be a source of danger.

Conclusion

Because of black citizens’ preparedness and their explicit determination to fight, the white mob, or more accurately mobs, were repeatedly prevented from gathering much steam and so from doing much damage. Most of the large scale fighting happened downtown, near the Mall. Between armed African Americans – groups as well as individuals, in homes, on the streets, and on streetcars – the Municipal Police, and the restored Provost Guard and other military forces, groups of white men intent on mayhem were prevented from realizing destruction and murder on the scale of a precursor like

East St. Louis or a successor like Tulsa.¹⁷⁹ There was no massacre, no mass expulsion, no communal humiliation. Property damage was so minimal as to go unmentioned in the papers. The death toll was fairly evenly distributed between the races, and in the end African American lawyers and advocates managed to undo much of the legal inequity. Though a reasonable number of white men were never prosecuted, the comparatively inordinate number of black defendants was mitigated, with fines and sentences decreased for many.

More than one source comments on the importance of black soldiers and former soldiers in the protection of black people, both as to weapons and organization. However, none of the recorded incidents of African Americans shooting whites notes the shooter as a military man, current or former. It seems likely that had there been evidence of that connection, the white papers and racial demagogues in the Congress would have made much of it, as would the Military Intelligence Division.¹⁸⁰ In fact, there was some talk of anarchist agitation – one MID document describes a white man with a foreign accent blaming whites for the riot and encouraging blacks to protect themselves, but the idea doesn't seem to have had any traction.¹⁸¹

There were also rumors of a secret black society, the *Boule*, which was behind the resistance. In his thesis, Damon Young mentions it almost in passing as an organizations whose members “had agreed to stand out against the whites if the occasion arose,” and

¹⁷⁹ In 1921 the town of Greenwood, a thriving black suburb of Tulsa was leveled, between 100 and 300 of its occupants killed, hundreds injured, 6000 interned, after a group of men resisted the lynching of a black man accused of assaulting his white girlfriend. This riot took place after weeks of truly hysterical race baiting in a local newspaper. See James Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), Tim Madigan, *The Burning* (New York: St. Martin's, 2001), Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1982).

¹⁸⁰ Theodore Kornweibel, *Seeing Red: Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925*; Arthur Barbeau and Florette Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: Black American Troops in World War I*; Mark Ellis, *Race, War, and Surveillance: African Americans and the United States Government During World War I*.

¹⁸¹ Arnold Memo, 7/24/19, MID “Negro Subversion” file, 10218-350, RG 165, NA.

says that these men were supposedly the leaders of the rioters. The *Post* makes no mention of this rumor, and most other sources are similarly mum. But a Military Intelligence document on “Negro Agitation” also mentions the Boule, using exactly the same language about “standing out against the whites” and says that Boule members “[fostered] the inspiring parties back of the riot.”¹⁸² Explaining that it is also known as the Ogoni Council, known by “the slang name of the Bowl,” the agent goes on to say that that the organization

originated in Dahomey, West Africa, and is said to be strongly entrenched in Africa in the English and French possessions....The oath is similar to that of the anarchists. They swear to die defending their brothers and to exterminate white rulers. It is said to be strong in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago.¹⁸³

No other mention of the Boule appears in the MID files I have seen; nor is it cited by Mark Ellis or Theodore Kornweibel, whose books look exhaustively at government surveillance of African American individuals and organizations in this period. Willard Gatewood, however, explains that Boule was another name for the Sigma Pi Phi, a highly selective, elitist fraternal organization formed in 1904 in Philadelphia “to bring together college-educated Afro-Americans for social purposes.” The Boule Gatewood describes was the opposite of anarchistic, and their anti-white program, such as it was, consisted of bringing together black people who could “compete successfully with whites.” We have seen, however, that some members of Washington’s black elite were as committed to violent self defense as anyone else, and it is not impossible that some of them were also members of the Boule. By Gatewood’s account though, there was no

¹⁸² Interestingly, this report is dated July 1919. It seems surprising that only a few years later Young would have access to such a document; perhaps he and the MIB agent had the same source. Neither cites it.

¹⁸³ “Negro Agitation,” Military Intelligence Branch, 10218-364, 7/1/1919 [sic – maybe 7/31?], Glasser files, RG 60, National Archives.

branch of the organization in Washington, and in 1920 its membership was only 177, so it is highly unlikely that this organization, as such, was leading black fighters during the riot.¹⁸⁴

In the end, the riot left at least seven men dead, countless wounded, and a city deeply shaken. Compared to many other Red Summer riots, the death toll in Washington was low and the degree of property destruction negligible. But the fact of the riot's happening in the seat of national government, in the very shadow of the capitol dome, gave it national significance. Politicians, editorialists, ministers, and individual citizens both black and white, pointed to the symbolic meaning of this disruption in this time and place. And various contexts could be seen to magnify the implications: the Red Summer, the Red Scare, the recent war, the bolshevik menace, the anarchist threat, and so on.

The riot in Washington was not a pogrom, but it could have been if not for the actions of the city's black inhabitants. And not to be underestimated is the fact that East St. Louis was a significant part of the reason for that response. African Americans in Washington repeatedly pointed to that tragedy as exactly what they feared and were determined to prevent happening in their city. The reaction among African Americans across the country to East St. Louis had been tremendous, and its lesson of the need for – and the efficacy of – self defense was central to the black politics of the period. This politics, however it was articulated by elites and middle class leaders, was expressed just as much in the response of the lower classes to the threat of white rioters and, one assumes, at least in part to the calls to arms put forth by ministers and other community leaders. Without a doubt such calls also originated from less privileged sectors – they

¹⁸⁴ Gatewood, *Aristocrats*, 234-36.

would not have simply waited to be told what to do – but we do not have the record of them.

Events in the capital were substantially different from what happened in Chicago only a few days later. Rioting in Chicago started July 27, went on for fourteen days and left 38 dead, 23 black and 15 white, and 537 injured, of whom 342 were black, 195 white. There was widespread property destruction, and white police openly and actively participated in the violence against blacks. At the same time, there were similarities: African Americans in Chicago were ready for the white mobs, armed mostly with guns and knives, though more often sniping rather than working in large groups, while whites mostly used beating implements and the power of numbers for their mayhem. Some black successfully kept white mobs out of their sections, though in other places their homes were destroyed.¹⁸⁵ African Americans in Chicago had paid attention to what happened in the capital, and though the outward circumstances leading to violence in their city were fundamentally different, many of the central forces, like those tying all the Red Summer riots together, were the same.¹⁸⁶

Though the capital's "race war" was not a lynching, it began in a way that was typical of such events. In a way, it was a lynching that didn't happen. The specter of lynching, which overhung the nation in this period, and was certainly familiar to the inhabitants of this southern city, was both impetus for the violence and preventive of its culmination. It is important to remember that in the U.S. in this period everyone knew the

¹⁸⁵ Tuttle, *Race Riot*, 34, 65.

¹⁸⁶ For evidence of black Chicagoans' awareness of events in D.C., see Tuttle, *Race Riot*. See also, the *Chicago Defender* for July and August of 1919, and Carl Sandburg, *The Chicago Race Riots* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1969).

script – or a version of it.¹⁸⁷ For black Washingtonians, the signs of impending danger were clear, and they prepared themselves to meet it even as they called on “constituted authorities” to do their jobs and prevent it (an option not everywhere available to African Americans).¹⁸⁸ That sector of the white populace which was so inclined responded to the signals as well, and attempted to collect itself into a lynch mob. But the conditions weren’t right for a number of reasons, and the lynching couldn’t happen – primarily because the specter itself had roused potential victims to protect themselves.

A flyer that was distributed around the city in the aftermath of the riot read as follows:

Be Ye Also Ready for We Know Not When They Will
Return

Lest We Forget!

Lest we forget the Democracy for which our men fought and died; lest we forget to strike our enemies the death blow when the lives of our mothers, fathers, wives, sweethearts, sisters and brothers are sought by the white intruder; lest we forget the vile, insidious propaganda directed against us in this the Nation’s Capital by infamous Pseudo-Americans and the press; lest we forget vows and oaths made and taken to right our wrongs without fear and without compromise after the war; we do solemnly declare to lash ourselves to our gallant tars, and expire together in one common cause, fighting for a safe and decent place to live in.

Mothers and fathers, we are ready to protect you at *any* cost.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ D.W. Griffiths’ *Birth of a Nation*, which I discuss in Chapter 3, came out in 1915. It was perpetually popular and also perpetually protested by black people for decades. Likewise the national antilynching movement was strong and visible in this period. And finally, of course, news of southern lynchings was frequently published in papers across the country, as often for its prurient entertainment value as for its moral objectionability.

¹⁸⁸ Houston document, NAACP files, G34, Library of Congress. African Americans in most other cities and certainly in many rural towns would have been taking their lives in their hands by making such demands on law enforcement. For a black Washingtonian’s explicit characterization of the white mobs as lynchers, see W. E. Hawkins, “When Negroes Shot a Lynching Bee into Perdition,” *Messenger*, September 1919, 28. This article is examined more extensively in Chapter 5.

¹⁸⁹ Attached to W. H. Loving memo, “Conditions Among Negroes in Washington,” 8/10/1919, “Negro Subversion” file, 10218-350, RG 165, National Archives.

CHAPTER FOUR

Telling Stories: Four Narratives from the Riot

As a white mob waits outside, shaken and outraged, a group of policemen breaks through the door of a home in northwest Washington. A quick conference, and one takes the lead as they charge up to the second floor room at the front of the house. Shots had erupted from its window into the street below minutes before, enraging the group gathered outside. Inside the darkened room Carrie Johnson, a seventeen year old African American woman, hides with her father Benjamin under a bed as the first policeman, Detective Sergeant Harry Wilson, 29, comes into the room. In a moment, she shoots him dead, a bullet to the heart. His partner fires back, wounding both father and daughter. They are dragged out and arrested. As they wait for the ambulance, the white crowd threatens to lynch them both on the spot.¹

The city was aflame with “blazing race hatred,” as the *Washington Post* put it, and its citizens experienced the riot in a variety of ways.² The overarching narrative of those four days outlined in the previous chapter only begins to describe what was happening in the city. In this chapter I will consider four separate stories from the riot, each of which appeared in a different context. By examining the accounts and considering continuities as well as disjunctures, motives and rationales – both for the experiences as well as the narratives – I hope to gain a clearer idea of what happened, why it happened and how Washingtonians interpreted their experiences. The chapter concludes with an examination of some aspects of D.W. Griffiths’ historical epic “The Birth of a Nation,” which was released in 1915. The film was a cultural phenomenon – it

¹ *Washington Evening Star*, 7/23/19.

² *Washington Post* (WP), 7/22/1919.

was the first “blockbuster” movie, making cinematic history with its technical and stylistic innovations. It drew thousands of people to the movies, and at the same time galvanized black protest because of its intensely negative portrayal of African Americans and its perspective on slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. My examination will focus on the ways in which the film highlighted the race and gender thinking at the heart of the white supremacist violence which shaped the American experience, and which was driving the behavior of both blacks and whites in the Red Summer.

The central theme of the movie is the threat that free black people present to civilization, and the movie presents not just a rationale but an active exhortation to lynching. The arguments and justifications Griffiths offers for white violence against African Americans are precisely those on which the white rioters and their allies in D.C. and elsewhere relied. The movie’s story of gradual black political, social, and economic depredation in the face of white resentment and restraint, with the galvanizing trespass against a white woman by a depraved black man is exactly the story rioters told themselves and each other in order to inspire, sustain, and justify their actions. For this reason, and because the images within and long-term effect of the film were so powerful, I have chosen to look at how the movie enacted the fantasies and ideologies of racialized gender and sexual identity which were so central to so many Americans’ worldview in this period, and which they expressed so violently in events like the riot of 1919.

Taken together, the four narratives from within the riot also demonstrate the centrality of gender and sexuality in the behavior, expression, and thinking of people across racial, class, and gender lines. Each of the stories relies on specific gender formulations to convey its central message; indeed, that message itself has in each case a

great deal to do with very gendered ways of framing reality. The interplay of often inconsistent constructs, within and across these narratives, demonstrates not only how central an organizing principle gender itself was, but how often ideals and concepts thereof stood in linguistically for other kinds of concepts and forces, in people's thinking and in the ways in which they described and interpreted events.

In shooting at the mob, and then at Harry Wilson, Carrie Johnson was defending her home and her family. People on both sides of the color line were calling on each other to do exactly that, but as a young black woman, Johnson certainly did not embody the active figure projected in anyone's rhetoric of self defense. The presence and apparent inaction of her father on the scene further confounds gender conventions, which would normally call for the patriarch to do the protecting. This story is remarkable because Johnson defies very specific norms in such an extreme way that her actions serve to highlight those norms by overturning them.

One night after the death of Sergeant Wilson, a white woman ventured on her own into a heavily guarded black neighborhood in the northwest. In her account, which appeared as a letter in the August 9, 1919 issue of *The Nation*, Dr. Evelyn G. Mitchell (she signed her letter EGM) tells of encounters with dozens of African American men, whom she describes as forthcoming, brave, and prepared, but also frightened and bewildered. To her, they were uniformly unthreatening, as she had somehow known they would be. This letter provides an important alternative to the newspaper stories, a window onto what some of the city's streets were like at the height of the riot. It also expands the perspective on the District's (non-rioting) whites during the days of the riot – not all were cowering at home, afraid, angry, bewildered – and it offers insight into the

varieties of social and political experience and opinion in the city. Neither mobbist nor politician, Mitchell was an independent-minded white woman who acted (thanks to a strong sense of entitlement) out of sympathy with the city's black population. Her letter and the mentality it bespeaks lengthen the visible spectrum of white opinion and action in the city, for she cannot have been unique in her thinking, even if she was so in her actions.

Beginning on Monday morning and continuing for the duration of the riot, a group of African American gentlemen paid a series of calls on city police officials. They demanded police protection for their people and warned of the consequences should such protection fail to materialize. Attorney William Houston, a leading figure in the District branch of the NAACP, wrote an account of the men's efforts for James Weldon Johnson, the organization's field secretary. Though their labors were almost entirely unsuccessful, the gentlemen were persistent and insistent with white government officials. In relating these efforts to NAACP headquarters, Houston was clear that the men had not sacrificed dignity or entitlement, but rather acted to express both, repeatedly.

This document describes by implication an important aspect of the New Negro attitude ascendant among the city's African Americans, as enacted most forcefully in black citizens' defense of their persons, homes, and neighborhoods against white mobs. Central to New Negro thinking was an insistence on the manhood – and therefore citizenship rights – of African American men. The rhetoric of the New Negro, and of many male civil rights activists in this period, was vigorously masculinist and explicitly defiant of white supremacist characterizations which grounded their claims of black inferiority in a presumed lack of sexual differentiation between black men and women. In

the report, Houston's attitude is deliberately tempered, however, and falls short of radicalism, relying instead on respectability. He is a member of the city's black elite, and his entitlement comes as much from that fact as from the widespread and growing New Negro ethos. The gentlemen take no direct credit for the organization of patrols or other actions besides their meetings with officials, but endorse the actions of African Americans on the streets. They are therefore justifying the street activism in both form and substance, and using their own elite status to legitimize the actions of their social inferiors.

A further refraction through which this chapter examines the riot is the *Washington Post's* portrayal of white women in the riot. The widow of Harry Wilson, the police officer shot by Carrie Johnson becomes, in the paper's overwrought coverage, every(white)woman. She is not simply the bereaved widow, but also the victim on whose behalf the riot was initially provoked, the innocent, defenseless child-woman whose peril drives red-blooded white men to rage and vengeance unmoderated by legal or other strictures. In Mrs. Wilson, the stereotypical female at the center of pre-riot articles describing black "assaults" metamorphoses into the widow of the hero shot as he rushes to defend her. She and her baby are described in melodramatic, formulaic terms designed to provoke both sympathy and financial contributions to a fund for her support. At the same time, on a slightly more subterranean level, the description attempts to validate the actions of white mobs, which had been provoked to violence by the paper's own depictions of that figure as a victim. It is through this narrative that Griffiths' *Birth of a Nation* comes in.

It is crucial to look closely at the multiple ways in which gender functioned in the riot from inception to aftermath because the gendered language and concepts were deployed so insistently in contemporary description and analysis. Following the tradition of racial lynching, white people in D.C. – many of them recent southern transplants, don't forget – sublimated their economic and social anxieties in timeworn racial stereotypes in order to provoke, to justify, and to rationalize irrational and often illegal and violent actions against politically subordinate African Americans. In pointing to the centrality of gender here, I am not positing it as an interpretive panacea, a catch-all category of analysis that is clearly ever-present but ultimately fails to explain anything. I am rather seeking to understand something about how and why usually inconsistent and always racialized ideas about gender (and sexuality) functioned as they did, as both interpretive and motivating forces.

Gender – like race – is a fundamental way in which persons understand themselves and others, and individuals and groups have norms and expectations for gender-based behavior. Crucial to using gender and race as categories of analysis is the ability to see it as historically and socially contingent and therefore necessarily fluid. At the same time we know that historical actors held their race and gender ideologies to be grounded in fixed, essential truths about humans.³ This contradiction, whereby in order to perform its function such ideology must be fluid while seeming fixed, is fundamental to the ability to reconcile the inconsistencies and contradictions that inevitably arise. The

³ Or, as Gail Bederman puts it, “Part of the way gender functions is to hide these contradictions and camouflage the fact that gender is dynamic and always changing. Instead, gender is constructed as a fact of nature, and manhood is assumed to be an unchanging, transhistorical essence, consisting of fixed, naturally occurring traits.” *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, 7. On comparable fluidity of race concepts, see Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*. .

fluidity of ideology allows its adherents to work through the cognitive dissonance which inevitably arises when historical actors behave contrary to the proscriptions of race or gender norms. Also crucial to this analysis is the fact that for these subjects gender is always racialized, so that for instance claims to manhood or aspersions on the manhood of others appear again and again in racial terms. In the period under examination, ideals of manhood or womanhood in the U.S. were racially defined, as they had been for many years.⁴ Certainly, race and gender ideologies fulfilled various purposes, but their two primary functions were prescriptive and explanatory.

Carrie Minor Johnson

The experience of Carrie Johnson, not only in the moments of greatest drama, but in the days and hours preceding it, and certainly as it was reconstructed and interpreted by reporters and others, encapsulates several central aspects of the riot, narrative as well as analytic. In 1919 African Americans were deep in a complicated conversation about self assertion and self defense. Not surprisingly, gender was a central theme in this discourse. In political, economic, and social realms, black people in the U.S. were asserting themselves, and defying white attempts at holding the color line. On both sides of that line, discussion and explanation surrounding the riot, no matter its source or purpose, were substantially dependent on tropes and assumptions of gender and race. In one widely held view, Washington's African American *men* did the natural, manly thing in response to the barbaric white mob: they protected their homes, families, communities. In concluding the *Crisis* article describing his investigation of the riot, NAACP Field Secretary James Weldon Johnson wrote,

⁴ Again, Bederman and Omi and Winant, as well as Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, among others.

The Negroes saved themselves and saved Washington by their determination not to run, but to fight – fight in defense of their lives and their homes. If the white mob had gone on unchecked – and it was only the determined effort of black men that checked it – Washington would have been another and worse East St. Louis.⁵

Johnson is arguing here that the riot marks a turning point in black responses to white violence, that black men have finally decided to stand and fight rather than run. He alludes to decades of lynchings as well as the 1917 massacre of African Americans in East St. Louis. He is also referring to ongoing and heated discussions in the pages of *Crisis* and other black publications, and in churches and communities around the nation, about the appropriate responses to white actions – physical or other – against African Americans. Manhood is the ultimate justification, the unanswerable rationale. It is also, conveniently, lacking in definition and therefore useful on all sides of an argument.

And of course, in their turn white men told themselves and each other – in D.C. and around the country – that they were acting to protect white women, and by extension the entire social order. This was the quintessential lynchers' defense. The rape of white women by black men, in this view, was so outrageous to white manhood that it brought on an irreversible rage that could only be satisfied by the most violent and immediate justice. Whites, including many who deplored the barbarity of the practice, had frequently rationalized it with the argument that the lynchers were acting out of an unfortunate but unavoidable instinct.

There was, of course, one figure missing from the little diorama of the white narrative, she who was in actual fact most often the rape victim: the black woman. African Americans were well aware of this scenario, and they had for years actively

⁵ *Crisis*, September 1919, 243.

challenged the hegemonic white formulation of white woman as rape victim.⁶ Black women and men had consistently pointed to the fact that it was white men who had been the rapists, and black women the victims, for generations. These critiques were sometimes linked to the most dangerous charge: that when there was sexual contact between black men and white women, it was frequently consensual. Of course African Americans had to be careful about where and when they said this – Ida B. Wells was chased out of Memphis as early as 1892 for refuting in an editorial the black rapist scenario and positing an entirely different explanation for white violence in the South. The Wilmington, N.C. race riot of 1898 also grew out of an editorial refuting the “rape story.” Its author, Alexander Manly, said, “You cry aloud for the virtue of your women, while you seek to destroy the morality of ours.” The presses on which his editorial was printed were destroyed and the building burned by a white mob which then set out to terrorize the city’s black population, killing ten or twenty people, wounding many others, destroying and appropriating property, and chasing out many of the city’s black professionals for good.⁷ Accusations such as Manly’s were complicated for “respectable” African Americans to make, because there was great concern with refuting the toxic and widespread image of licentious black women to which the black rapist stereotype was linked.⁸ Many middle class and elite African Americans avoided public or very specific reference to the rape of black women because the racist rationale for such rapes was so potent and dangerous. This avoidance had an undermining effect on critiques of racial

⁶ Ida B. Wells was chased out of Memphis as early as 1892 for refuting the black rapist scenario and positing an entirely different explanation for white violence in the South.

⁷ Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 196-98. See also Gilmore.

⁸ Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Southern Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” in *Southern Women: Histories and Identities* ed. Bernhard et al (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992) ; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 189-195; Higginbotham, “African American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs* 17 (1992), 251-74 ; Hodes 174, 198.

violence however, by removing one of its key manifestations from much of the discussion.⁹

Amidst the violence of the Red Summer, African Americans were very clear about the political and historical significance of the rape story, and how it had been deployed. In the aftermath of the D.C. riot, Dr. Walter Johnson preached to a Washington congregation:

Nor must the Ku Klux Klan, of the Reconstruction period, that institution of murder which was born of the Civil War, now re-born, be suffered to fabricate accounts of assaults upon women, where assaults have not been committed, nor must women who glory in kindling the fires of race hate by the manufacture of false tales of outrage, be allowed to stir the community to madness by their lies. No wonder criminals of the vilest type cannot be apprehended and punished, when they are only the fictions of an evil mind.¹⁰

Here Dr. Johnson refers directly to the story told in *The Birth of a Nation*, and the lie at the heart of that story, a lie which, as African Americans knew, frequently functioned to inspire and/or validate white violence against blacks, and which was certainly the spark for the D.C. riot. Like many black anti-lynching activists, Dr. Johnson implicitly draws the connection between these “false tales of outrage” and the “madness” they provoke, and the persistence of real crime and disorder in the community.¹¹

In the months and especially the weeks preceding the riot, Washington’s African Americans warned each other repeatedly to defend themselves, and following the riot

⁹ Hazel Carby, “‘On the Threshold of Women’s Era Era’: Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory.” In *“Race,” Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 316 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 301-316; Elsa Barkley Brown, quoted in Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching*, 133.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Washington Bee*, 8/2/1919.

¹¹ See Gail Bederman’s chapter on Ida B. Wells (Ch. 2) for a detailed discussion of the ways in which black activists deployed the idea of “civilization” to condemn white violence and marshal international support for antilynching legislation.

they congratulated themselves and each other for having done so. The black man was importuned to protect his home, his wife, and his family. Two weeks after the riot, an editorial in the *Washington Bee* characterized what happened:

Colored citizens were told to disarm, while the white mob killed them. It is said that it was cavalry that kept the mob from invading South Washington and the Northwest colored section. It was the well-organized citizens who were prepared to meet all invaders; it was the determination of the black man to protect his home, his wife and his children; it was the determination of the law-abiding citizens to protect themselves, because the police authorities were powerless to protect them.¹²

Carrie Johnson's story, however, complicates this narrative. Johnson's actions simultaneously upheld and challenged the rhetoric which contended that black men must protect their homes and families. In acting to defend *her* home and *her* family, Johnson fulfilled the black rhetoric of self-defense. In her youth and femininity however, she simultaneously refuted and reinforced a central tenet of the logic behind that rhetoric, which held that bodies such as hers were exactly what needed protecting. Further, in a reversal of putative roles, she was actually protecting her father as well as herself.

Though her actions challenged gender norms, the city's African American community and indeed black people around the country embraced Johnson and celebrated her actions as heroic, sending money for her legal defense and writing to black periodicals in her support. One letter to NAACP president Moorfield Storey came from Ella Rice, treasurer of the New Jersey Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. Dated August 16, 1919 and written on the letterhead of the Rice Industrial School, the letter stated that the Federation wished to send a contribution "to the young girl implicated in

¹² "The Rights of the Black Man," editorial, *Washington Bee*, 8/2/19.

the recent race riot at Washington.” This note indicates that Carrie Johnson was seen as exemplary by some who had the molding of young black women as their work. At the same time, by calling her a “young girl” and by referring not at all to the action (coded as masculine not feminine) in which Carrie was “implicated,” Rice preserves gentility – her own as well as Carrie’s, and of course that of her constituents.¹³

Local black papers similarly avoided the contradiction by downplaying the young woman’s actions without disavowing them. In its initial report on the shooting, the *Bee* described the shooting in the passive voice (Wilson “was shot”) and later notes that Johnson was charged with the shooting.¹⁴ Elsewhere that same issue, an editorial is a bit equivocal:

The Bee regrets the death of Detective Wilson. He can only blame himself. At the corner of Seventh and Florida avenue, the evening of the riot, he was vindictive toward the colored people. Did he have the right to invade the home of the person who shot him? Did he see a felony committed? Did he witness a murderous assault? If he did, he was justified in entering and his assailant should be punished; if not, he had no right to enter this home.¹⁵

Perhaps in an effort at fairness, perhaps in order to downplay Carrie’s gender transgression, the editorial refuses to deploy her femininity in her own defense.¹⁶ Wilson is to blame for his own death, unless he was justified in entering the house. It is unclear whether the editor intends sarcasm in asking about his motivation in entering the Johnson home; perhaps the ascription of blame to Wilson is the key to that question. Calvin Chase, the paper’s editor, was often inconsistent; however, the overall tone, especially in

¹³ Houston document, NAACP archives, D.C. Branch files, G34, Library of Congress

¹⁴ “Colored Americans’ Reward,” *Bee*, 7/26/1919.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ It could also have been that initially there was a question as to whether it was Carrie Johnson or her father who shot the gun.

the context of his other celebrations of and exhortations to self defense, seems clear. It is Johnson's gender, and possibly her age, which seem to cause the hesitation.

In fact, generally the black press downplayed the significance of Johnson's actions. It was almost as though she was implicated in an accident. Though she was supported, she was not exactly celebrated or lionized. In part this seems to have been part of a general strategy wherein black newspapers downplayed instances of black violent action; by casting such instances as a necessary response to threat, they perhaps sought to undercut white characterizations of African Americans as violent, uncontrolled, passionate. This was just as true when it came to black men: the shooters of a number of white men during the riot were not celebrated, though they were certainly acknowledged and in general depicted as heroic victims, as here in the Baltimore *Afro-American*:

The only thing that kept the Washington riots from causing as severe a loss of life as the East St. Louis massacre was the preparedness of Washington's colored population. Not in all cases, but in a fair proportion, armed colored men and women used revolvers to good effect on mobs attacking their homes....

To the credit of the colored citizenry in the Capital, it can be said that in the first stages of the riot, no single colored man took the initiative in creating disturbances. Every time whites were the aggressors, until human nature could stand it no longer, and in pure defense groups of men in fifties and hundreds went out to show the attackers that the colored population was not altogether defenceless.[sic]¹⁷

While acknowledging that at a certain point African Americans began to act more aggressively, the paper still framed that action as fundamentally defensive. The inclusion of women among those named as armed would seem to be an acknowledgment not just of Carrie Johnson but also other women. The latter are still restricted to domestic space

¹⁷ "Washington Riots," editorial, BAA 7/25/1919.

however: they used their revolvers “on mobs attacking their homes.” In this depiction, it was men who were out in groups on the streets. The armed cars which the *Post* and others described patrolling black neighborhoods, and which were said in some cases to include women among their occupants, are not specifically mentioned in the *Bee* or the *Afro-American*. They might, however, be there by implication, in the general praise of successful African American self defense. They were not, in any case, specifically disavowed.

Though in many ways it let pass an opportunity for wild sensationalization, the white media employed familiar tropes in telling the story. Carrie Johnson is called a “negress,” the unfeminine counterpart of the beast/rapist whose actions provoked the riot. The policeman she shot as he invaded her home was in this telling the heroic instrument of order; she “or someone” was shooting wildly into the street out the window of her house.¹⁸ Wilson, the valiant young sergeant, takes point, both respectful and self-assured:

When the two detectives ascended the stairs O’Brien, who had participated in many daring encounters during his long years of service, was in the lead. On the steps and just before the upper landing was reached, Wilson, reputed to be one of the bravest of the younger detectives, suggested that he take the lead...“I’m younger than you,” he said to O’Brien, as he brushed past him. “Let me go first.” An instant later he was dying.¹⁹

As the *Post* explained it,

Sergt. Wilson’s death was directly in the line of duty and in accord with the best traditions of the police department. Charging up a flight of pitch-black steps in the house at 220 G street from a second-story window from which a volley of shots had been fired, he was met with a bullet, said to

¹⁸ Never mind that what she actually appears to have been doing was fending off a white mob – she was not wild but rational, deliberate.

¹⁹ Washington *Evening Star*, 7/22/1919.

have been fired by Carrie Minor Johnson, a negress aged 17, as she lay under a bed.²⁰

In fact, in its telling, the *Post* all but erases Johnson. The story is about Wilson, the hero cut down in his attempt to bring order. His shooter disappears. Repeated references to Wilson cite his heroism, his habit of taking chances, his protectiveness of the other officer. The shooting into the street to which the officers are responding is “wild,” a symptom of black disorder rather than a response to white menace. Because of who she is, because of gender, it seems, the paper chooses not to demonize Johnson too strongly. Although the defeminized negress is a figure ready to hand, that figure, in this formulation, must not succeed in cutting down the white hero. And if she does, she certainly must not survive to be revealed as a frightened young woman, much less one of respectable social status.

In the eventual trial of Carrie Johnson, the judge would not allow an argument of self defense, and the outcome was a conviction for manslaughter – the jury’s compromise with a first degree murder charge.²¹ It is possible to see this denial of the legal option of self defense as a denial of Johnson’s *right* to defend herself, an instance of white supremacist rejection of black citizenship rights. Johnson’s subsequent motion for a new trial based on the exclusion of self defense came before a judge who “stated that he could well understand the mental attitude of the prisoner, who at the time of the alleged shooting was but 17 years old.” He “granted a new trial on the ground that when the shooting occurred the young woman was in terror for her life and acted on that

²⁰ “Nation’s Capital,” WP 7/22/1919.

²¹ “Girl is Convicted in Wilson’s Death,” WP 1/14/1921.

impulse.”²² With this, the prosecutor declined to pursue the charge, and Carrie Johnson was free.²³ Her identity as a citizen was restored, and perhaps her femininity as well.

I have said that the Johnson/Wilson incident in certain ways encapsulated the central issues of the riot. For many African Americans Sergeant Wilson would have represented centuries of white invaders breaking into black homes and threatening the most vulnerable. The story of Carrie Johnson is in one sense a wish-fulfillment fantasy of that invading white power figure cut down, in the most unexpected way. U.S. history is not exactly rife with instances of black women shooting white cops. In this view, the community is personified by its least likely member as she is moved, in the face of the ultimate threat, to fight back at any cost, to defend home, family, and self, against the white attacker who had historically appropriated all those things, in the most violent and humiliating fashion imaginable.

Just as the white rioters found themselves after an initial surge defied, resisted, and finally withstood, so the white police in their incursion into the Johnson home encountered an entirely unexpected and for them disastrous response. The rape scenario is simultaneously overturned and exposed, for those with eyes to see, and the New Negro politics of self-defense (which explicitly refute both the scenario, and the usual victimization of black men which it is intended to justify) are at once ratified and reconfigured through the figure and actions of this young woman.

Just after the peak of the riot’s violence, when white women’s vulnerability had been highlighted in the papers for months, this item appeared on page 2 of the *Post*:

Women Ready for Intruders.

²² “Girl Gets New Trial,” WP 6/4/1921.

²³ “Released in Riot Killing,” WP 6/21/1921. See also, “Girl to be Tried in Murder,” WP 1/11/1921.

Especially well guarded from within are homes where men are absent during part or all of the night. The women have been supplied with arms and have been told how to use them. And if a single threshold is cross [sic] in violation of the law the intruder runs a chance of being shot.²⁴

Part warning to potential assailants and part celebration of white women's bravery, this item also becomes an ironic allusion to the shooting of Harry Wilson. Moreover, the idea that "homes where men are absent in the night" could be "exceptionally well guarded from within" would seem in one sense to contradict the idea that women needed men's protection at all, or that white men placed their women's safety as a priority – since they freely absented themselves in the night. Furthermore, the paragraph implicitly admits the falsity of the idea that women were helpless and that their men held their safety before all else. In fact, by this account women were well able to protect themselves, and may not have been so endangered in the first place; and further, that families often faced economic and perhaps social realities that required the absence of men from the home in the night. This item relied on the unthinking acceptance of contradictory ideas: the one, that women were seriously imperiled and helpless to protect themselves and the other, that they were well able to keep themselves safe without the aid of their menfolk. This was the kind of paradox that both relied on and fed the ideological thinking of rioters and witnesses alike.

A further reality which the item did not acknowledge openly but which most readers would almost certainly have known was the fact that many of the city's women were living without menfolk. As we have seen, the city's population had swelled with war workers, most of them young white women. In the months before the riot their

²⁴ "Women Arms Buyers," WP 7/ 23/1919.

presence, along with that of recently decommissioned soldiers, and the consequent pressure on the city's housing stock and employment opportunity, was an actual, though unsensational, reason for the city's growing racial tension. This population of young white women, most of them from the South, were in some ways the target (as consumers) and in others the subject (as potential or putative victims) for the white papers' hysterical (and false) claims of a black crime wave. The paper's claim that homes protected by women are "exceptionally well guarded" could work on multiple levels: as exhortation to the women themselves, as reassurance to the city's whites, or as a marker of how great the danger seemed to be. Here the female figure works on multiple rhetorical levels, simultaneously domestic, confined to the home, and a part of the action taking place on the streets, both endangered and protected.

It seems clear that overcrowding and anxiety about the loss of war work, combined with the presence of large numbers of recently demobilized military men, fed into the atmosphere of violence and fear that led to the July riot in the capital.²⁵ The presence of such a large number of single white women, "unprotected" and supposedly defenseless, provided the rhetorical ground for the daily papers' stories of black marauders. Beyond their screaming headlines, many of these "assault" stories (in repetition of the classic "black rapist" scenario which rationalized so many southern lynchings) were actually reports of street tussles – jostles, intimidation, even robbery, but not rapes. The specific event that sparked the riot was a white woman's report that two black men had bumped into her and tried to take her umbrella. They ran when she screamed, pursued by nearby white men. Though there had been four more serious

²⁵ Abernethy, "Race War," 315.

attacks in the months leading up to the riot, to which a single black man would later confess, the less violent street confrontations received equal attention in the dailies.²⁶

Though the above item warning that women were armed was aimed at those who might be plotting such invasions – understood as the same kind of black men supposedly behind the putative crime wave – there were no reports of such invasions or attendant shootings, other than the Johnson-Wilson incident. In explaining the initial formation of the mob, white men (in D.C. and around the country) told themselves and each other that they were acting in reaction to intolerable violence against white women, and by extension they understood themselves to be protecting the entire social order. This was the quintessential lynchers’ defense. The rape of white women by black men, in this view, was so outrageous to white manhood that it brought on an irreversible rage that could only be satisfied by the most violent and immediate justice. Whites, including many who deplored the barbarity of the practice, had frequently rationalized it with the argument that the lynchers were acting out of an unfortunate but unavoidable instinct.

Dr. Evelyn G. Mitchell

In her own right, Dr. Evelyn Mitchell refuted the rape myth by deciding to walk out alone into the city at night on July 22, after three days of riot. She acted against ascribed gender norms even as she relied on them to accomplish her goals. In the letter she wrote to the *Nation* describing her experience that night, she says that she went out to see for herself what was happening, and to offer reassurance to the black inhabitants of Ledroit Park. The letter appeared on August 9th, under the heading “The Washington

²⁶ “Negroes Attack Girl,” WP 7/19/1919. For the confession, see “Crime Mysteries Cleared,” WP 8/8/1920.

Riots.”²⁷ The letter gives an account of the actions and mental state of some of the city’s African American men on that fourth night, when people in the city did not know what to expect.

Although she ostensibly writes about what she saw that night, in many ways the writer’s subject is herself. Her tone is novelistic, and she casts herself as a certain type of heroine, a little headstrong perhaps, self assured certainly. She sets the scene:

On Tuesday night, when so many in Ledroit Park feared a mob and a general massacre, and when most white men believed that a white woman who ventured into that section would be literally devoured, I took it into my head to go there, and go I did.

The voice here could be taken from a popular, even pulpy novel, the story of a modern young woman unconstrained by convention, and unconvinced by the assumptions and rumors that govern the beliefs and behaviors of others. Her descriptions of the black men she encounters stand in marked contrast to her self-depiction. The men come across as childlike and often fearful, but at the same time brave.

Again and again I was asked: “Is a mob gathering on Pennsylvania Avenue? Will they come up and burn us out? Is the Park cordoned?” For they did not dare go downtown far enough to see if the troops were really there. Over and over, I heard the pathetic question: “Do the white folks care? Does anyone care? Are they really doing anything?”

In this portrayal, the men are at once noble and unthreatening. The writer is walking a delicate line in her representation, careful to show the men as somehow both manly and harmless, forced into a defensive posture by the aggression of others. Their questions about being burned out refer not only to specific events like East St. Louis in 1917, but

²⁷ EGM, “The Washington Riots,” letter to the editor of the *Nation* vol. 109, no. 2823 (8/9/19), 173.

also to the ever-present threat which the weeks of sensational headlines and growing tension in the city had highlighted so very starkly.

...[W]hy, those men were not out to “start something.” They were armed, most of them, and were quite frank about it, but they did not want a fight. They said they were out to see if a mob were coming, and, if there were, they were going home to barricade themselves; then if the mob tried to get in, there was trouble ahead. As one put it: “A man would be less than a man if he didn’t fight for his family and his home.”

These men are doing their duty – as fathers, husbands, members of a community. They have no choice, as men, but to protect their own. But they are also in a “perfect hysteria of dread,” a literally feminized state. Her depiction of the men’s fearfulness and deference, and even their simple determination, has the effect of placing the writer solidly above them, as a kind of beneficent and fearless patroness. This kind of portrayal was not uncommon. While some well-meaning whites did see African Americans as childlike, simple and yet noble, still others deployed those kinds of stereotypes in their attempts to assuage white fears.

Whether Mitchell believed those stereotypes or was simply making use of them, she appears to have been sure she would not in fact be “devoured” that night. This may have been because of her belief in her own superior knowledge of the city’s “negroes,” perhaps, and faith in her own authority. Or it could show that outside certain specific areas, the citizens of the District knew that there was little real danger, though the armed men on the street had already shown that they meant business. And, too, a solitary white woman, especially one of Mitchell’s social class, might well have assumed herself unthreatening, as opposed to the white men who could count on being shot at if they were

to venture into the same areas, especially if they weren't solitary. Her lack of fear may or may not bespeak elite status but it certainly shows her awareness that the "rape story" was a canard, like the beastly rapist image on which it relied. Since she was a member of the Washington branch of the NAACP and a "personal friend" of Oswald Garrison Villard, Mitchell was not only privy to that knowledge, but actively involved in efforts to discredit it.²⁸

In her opening paragraph, Mitchell is clear about her intent, the reason she "took it into [her] head to go."

I went for several reasons. One was to prove that a white woman could do it; another, because I knew what had been done by the authorities and thought that a little reassurance from a lone and harmless woman might go a good way, for I guessed the probable psychological state in that section. Besides, I wanted to know at first hand what the Negroes were doing and thinking. I found out.²⁹

She portrays herself as both a daring, self-confident heroine/adventuress, a feminist even ("to prove that a white woman could do it") but at the same time a respectable lady, so there might be no imputation of impropriety in her actions ("a lone and harmless woman"). Evoking decades of white women's reform activity, she comes across as a sort of Jane Addams figure, venturing among the less fortunate in order to enlighten and reassure them, simultaneously the teacher and the kindly patroness. She knows them, is able to guess at their psychological state and to offer them comfort, depicting herself as motherly almost in the manner of a benefactress to whom the black men she encounters

²⁸ Kendrick to Ovington, 8/24/1919. NAACP Archives, D.C. Branch files, G34, LOC. Villard, grandson of William Lloyd Garrison, by this time owned and wrote for both the *Nation* and the *New York Evening Post*.

²⁹ EGM, "Washington Riots," 173.

instinctively respond with respect and deference, drawn to her somehow, and forthcoming with explanations for themselves.

If I talked to one colored man, I talked to a hundred and fifty. Occasionally I would stop to speak to one I knew; oftener I would accost a group of unknown men and ask them for their views. Always and everywhere I met with courtesy and attention. As we talked, men would appear from the shadows – seemingly from the night itself – until there were perhaps twenty of us....And when we had finished our talk, the group would melt into nothingness and I would proceed on my quest.³⁰

She is fearless and just, never once admitting to nervousness or hesitation in her “quest,” whether faced with one armed man or a dozen. Her tone is both didactic and jejune, and one is left wondering about her intentions. On the one hand she tells of an adventure, on another she is trying to advance a specific political agenda in the context of the city, as for instance when she cites the paucity of black policemen on the city’s force: “...they spoke of the lack of colored police, and of the fact that Negroes were being dropped from the force and that none had been appointed since 1910.” Here she references the longstanding complaint of black citizens, brought into stark relief during the riot. In mentioning that she knew some of the men she encountered, she signals (deliberately or not) that some of them moved in her circles, if not socially then by some other association. In any case, this seems to be further evidence of the class diversity of the groups of black men on the street.

The letter serves as a thumbnail of some of the central arguments of the civil rights activists of the day. It even contains a reference to the frequently cited and distinguished service of black men in the war, and the disappointment many felt at the

³⁰ Ibid.

white nation's disregard for that service as evidenced not just in the extreme form of mob violence, but a general lack of acknowledgment.

A one-handed soldier said: "I enlisted; I gave the country my hand, and I was ready to give more. When I was in France, I was a man and a soldier, but when I get back here, I'm not a citizen; I'm not a man, even – just a big, black brute." It was not said bitterly; it went deeper than bitterness. He spoke like a man with a broken heart.

This is an interesting counterpoint to speculation in the *Post* in early July that the attacker of white women might be a returned black soldier who had gotten used to fraternizing with white women in France.³¹ The generally equitable treatment of African American soldiers serving under French command by both military officials and civilians in France was an flashpoint. Racist white Americans saw it as having dangerously encouraged African American hopes of "social equality," while blacks pointed to it as further proof of what black troops deserved. On both sides, the French experience fed hostility and violence. Writing in *Crisis* on the question, Du Bois spoke for many in connecting citizenship to military service, before and after the war. Millions of African Americans pointed to white Americans' failure to honor black soldiers as evidence not just of the stubbornness of racism but of a fundamental lack of decency, and even a failure of civilization among whites.

Another emblematic citation reiterates a well-known and much-used critique of white rationalizations for institutional racism:

Another [man] said: "They say this is to protect the white women. My father was in charge of a whole plantation and a family of white women during the Civil War. They

³¹ "Negro Again Attacks," WP 7/7/1919.

weren't afraid to leave the white women with us then, and Negroes are no different now."

From the first instance of Reconstruction-era fearmongering (and consequent brutality) among whites about black rapists, this was the black response. Mitchell uses it as a time-tested appeal to common sense, and a reminder to her white audience of both the history of black trustworthiness and perhaps too of white oppression. It is also implicitly a buttress to black masculinity, with the male slave left "in charge of" his female owners and their plantation and property, including, of course, himself.

There is only one moment where Mitchell hints at fear, though she doesn't emphasize it:

I saw but one noisy Negro, a half-witted and dishevelled-looking fellow, talking loudly and belligerently. Him two colored men seized and thoroughly shook, telling him that if he did not "shut up and get home," he would certainly find things happening to him.

Though she does not say that this man was actively threatening her, there is a sense here that in sending him away, the men are protecting her from him. In this moment the men are shown to be both gallant and forceful while also restrained. They do not physically hurt the "fellow," though they make it clear that they could if they felt it necessary, and they keep the level of behavior and discussion on the street elevated. Without giving up her own authority, Mitchell depicts an enactment of properly gendered behavior wherein she, as a specimen of femininity, is shielded from one irresponsible, uncouth male by men who are appropriate and protective without being presumptuous. It is a simple performance of gendered class norms, where race is not necessarily at issue.

Mitchell ends her letter with a statement that places her on a wider political and moral spectrum, demonstrating more about why she chose to venture out that night. Her closing words show her to be an idealist, and fundamentally unconventional:

I had been thinking of going to Serbia, but I believe my duty is here. I believe that our country needs all of us who are standing along the color line. I am ready to do anything possible, to whatever limit. If you [the editor], to whom I look as a leader in this situation, should ever need my services, you have but to speak. My soul is aflame, not with the glare of the destroying torch, but with the steady, incandescent glow which cannot be extinguished.

While the writer is not representative of a large number of white citizens, in D.C. or in the nation, neither is she altogether unique. The significance of her actions and her reporting of them lies in what it shows about her and others like her, as well as in the picture she paints of the streets of Washington during the riot, and the men she found there.

In the NAACP files there is a note from Board Chair Mary White Ovington to S.M.. Kendrick, secretary of the District branch regarding this “splendid” letter, asking if the writer was a member.³² Kendrick’s affirmative response notes that Mitchell had “assisted Mr. Seligman in his efforts here, and was instrumental” in other recent organization efforts.³³ This might lead one to wonder whether the story she describes in her letter actually took place exactly as told, or if it is in fact exaggerated or even fabricated, at least in part, a kind of looking-glass version of the apocryphal rape stories told by other white women which had provoked the riot in the first place. Even if it is not deliberately intended as a counterweight to such stories, this document can certainly be

³² Ovington to Kendrick, 8/20/1919. NAACP Archives, D.C. Branch files, G34, LOC.

³³ Kendrick to Ovington, 8/24/1919. NAACP Archives, D.C. Branch files G34, LOC.

read as one, a single calm and authoritative white female voice answering the hysterical chorus. Mitchell's tone is explicitly not that of a victim, and in fact by her actions and recounting, she implies that the idea of black men victimizing white women in the context of D.C. is a ridiculous one. The idea that she could have been "literally devoured" is patently preposterous, according to her story and the way she tells it.

William L. Houston

Other African American men in Washington, who were presumably not on the streets at night, or who at any rate chose not to emphasize their presence there, reported on their own, alternative action during the riot. A group of men, leaders in the local NAACP, made it their business to confront police officials about their duty to protect the city's African American populace. Attorney William Houston, one of their number, sent an account of their efforts to NAACP headquarters. This document provides another narrative of the riot and offers a picture of the portion of the city's black populace represented by the gentlemen whose various conferences it details. By their own report the city's African Americans are organized, fearless, and well-prepared. Although what the men are doing is asking the police to protect them and their peers, the writer's tone and indeed his explicit verbiage work to mitigate any appearance of helplessness or fear. In fact, he portrays their first meeting, (with the city's Police Commissioner) as more of a courtesy, a gentlemanly warning to those whose job it is to keep citizens safe that if they fail in this job, the citizenry will take care of itself:

The plain statement was made to the Commissioner and Superintendent of Police by a member of the delegation that colored men of Washington had determined not to stand up and be shot down like dogs, but they were prepared to protect their families and themselves and would

do so at all hazard – if full and complete protection was not afforded by the proper authorities.³⁴

It is civic duty, not fear nor an actual need for protection that motivates these visits to municipal officials. The men in question are determined, prepared; they are responsible citizens, plain speakers who out of manly courtesy offer the authorities warning of their preparedness because they know both their responsibilities and their due. As Houston tells it the gentlemen of the delegation convey command, entitlement, and fearlessness.

At this first meeting on Monday morning, citizens make a demand and issue a warning to city officials. In response, according to the narration, officials offered assurances of adequate protection. “These general assurances were in no ways satisfactory to the delegation, and demand was made” for more specific information, to which the commissioner and the police chief (a.k.a. the superintendent) explain that they have made arrangements with the military for both the revocation of leave, and the supplementation of the police force by military personnel, a possibly absurd arrangement, in that the military are to be taken off the streets in their troublemaking role and returned there as peacekeepers. This contradiction goes unaddressed except by inference, when the delegation protests the absence of black soldiers among those designated for police duty, because “it was believed by the colored population that they would not receive a square deal from the white soldiers.” The response to this complaint was “that all colored soldiers had been discharged,” and after additional protest, the discussion was left at that – at least for the moment.³⁵

³⁴ Houston document, NAACP Archives, D.C. Branch files, G34, LOC.

³⁵ Ibid.

When Neval Thomas reported on this meeting to Archibald Grimke he said that the officials “‘four-flushed’ and begged,” implying perhaps that their initial response was patently and disingenuously false – the “four-flushing” – and that when the delegation called them on it, the officials were forced into a more abject posture.³⁶ But it is difficult here as elsewhere to tell whether the apparent inadequacy of the officials’ explanations in the moment indicated dismissiveness toward the delegation or a kind of disingenuous attempt to explain away an obvious wrong. A suggestion to the officials that they could commission black soldiers goes unanswered, or at any rate the presumably unsatisfactory response is unreported, as is any response to the assertion that the city’s African Americans do not trust white soldiers. One wonders whether, in the interest of preserving in the report the most manly presentation, Houston decided to keep his tone resolute and uncomplaining, and so elided any insulting statements or behavior by white officials, explicit or otherwise.

The narrative continues: Monday night, despite the officials’ assurances, the rioting resumed, with four killed and many wounded. Half the dead and most of the wounded were white. “The colored man had protected his home and himself when he found that the authorities had not provided the protection for them which he was entitled to have.” Here, as throughout, is a forceful critique of the failure of “constituted authorities” to do their job. They are therefore to blame for death and injury, and their failure is unfavorably contrasted with the successful African American defense.³⁷

³⁶ Thomas to Grimke, probably 7/28/1919, A. Grimke Papers, NAACP Correspondence, box 39-28, folder 561, MSRC.

³⁷ Houston document, NAACP Archives, D.C. Branch files, G34, LOC.

In their continued efforts to protect the city's African Americans, the gentlemen next addressed the unjust racial disparity in arrest and punishment of rioters. They once again called upon the Commissioner of Police:

They spoke plainly to the commissioner, told him of the dissatisfaction of the people of color and of the deep-seated resentment by the race because of the outrageous acts of the policemen, and demanded that there should be fair dealing on the part of the police in the matter of making arrest of those engaged in disorderly conduct.

Here again Houston reports "plain speaking" and "demands." He relies on a formulation of manhood which contrasts civilized restraint, dignity, and awareness of duty with the uncontrolled violence that implies savagery.³⁸ He inverts the white scenario: it is black men, not white, who are the forces of order in Washington, and while he stops short of including the city's officials among the disorderly, his whole piece is essentially a description of their failure to contain the problem. Whether it was a failure of will or of ability, for Houston it denotes the lack of manhood, a cultural deficiency to which contemporary critics of the racist status quo more and more frequently attributed white official tolerance for racist violence.

Tuesday's rioting had "scarcely as much intensity as characterized the two previous nights, because, [sic] the colored men were so well organized and were prepared for such strong resistance that the rioters among the whites timidly advanced into danger points." Houston's assertion resonates with the *Post's* coverage of the riot's latter half, wherein black men become perpetrators and the white populace hapless victims. There is no mention in this report of Carrie Johnson's shooting of Harry Wilson, of the nature of the organized action African Americans took such as patrolling on foot or in cars, or of

³⁸ Ibid.

the participation of black soldiers in the organizing. The only specific incident the report describes follows the general statement about Tuesday night, and is presented at least in part as an explication for white “timidity.” It describes a black man’s shooting of two white men (the Home Guards Halbfinger and Belmont) who “roughly accosted him and started to offer him violence” as he got “peaceably” off a streetcar on his way home from work.

The colored man promptly drew his revolver and in self-defense killed one of the men out-right and severely wounded the other, who is now in the hospital with slight chances of recovery. In the other list of casualties occurring on this night, of the reported wounded and injured a vast majority were members of the white race, showing that the colored man put up a well organized and effective defense.³⁹

The writer is offering an alternative explanation for the riot’s subsiding; there is no mention of the rain, or of the military forces brought into the streets. It was the strong resistance of black men which ultimately forced the rioters to disperse. According to this view, the black resistance and resulting white injury rate “struck terror to the hearts of the white evil doers and mobists [sic] with the result that they ran to cover slinking away to their hiding holes.” Again, Houston is inverting the white newspapers’ depictions of disorganized, fearful, wounded negroes and powerful white men.

Throughout the document, even as he is reporting the specific details of the actions he and other men took in response to the riot and connected events, Houston both enacts and documents a performance of middle-class manliness. He employs the passive voice in order to evoke both authority and impartiality. By talking of complaints and demands, reporting the expression of dissatisfaction and resolve, Houston conveys both

³⁹ Ibid.

implicitly and explicitly a strong sense of entitlement and social power. In calling on city officials, these men are not hat in hand, petitioners looking for special treatment, but rather citizens demanding their due.

After this plain interview [on 7/21], the delegation departed giving the officials assurances that they were ready and willing to co-operate with them in every possible way for peace and good order, at the same time, yielding absolutely nothing in their demand for adequate protection for people of color, and emphasizing that the responsibility would be on those officials if insufficient preparation were had in the matter of ensuring peace and order.

What is also interesting is that the document records a series of failures – requests refused, mobs not restrained – as well as successes, all in the same rather triumphal tone. The delegation’s demand for black soldiers among those patrolling the city is refused; rioting breaks out afresh that same night, due to the officials’ failure to heed the delegation’s warning; the police unjustly arrest mostly black men; rioting erupts again on Tuesday night, “despite the promised adequate protection of the police.” Again, part of the paradox in Houston’s report lies in the implicit contrast between the upstanding, forthright black men of the delegations he describes and the inadequacy of the explanations and assurances proffered by white officials. This inadequacy could be read in more than one way – it could be embarrassed and self conscious, or it could be condescending and dismissive, an outright acknowledgement that they are not concerned about the transparency and obvious insufficiency of the explanation, because they lack respect for their audience.

Therefore, the reasons the officials give for not granting any of the delegation’s requests are somewhat lifeless: there are no black men among the soldiers patrolling during the riot because all the black soldiers have been discharged already; the police

chief will not commission black men to bear arms in order to assist the police because he says he cannot commission any citizens during the crisis; and finally, faced with the evidence of white men who *had* been commissioned (the two Home Defense men in plain clothes who were shot on Tuesday night), the explanation was that they had been commissioned before the rioting broke out.

In spite – or perhaps because – of his group’s failure to galvanize white officials, Houston couches his narrative in terms of privilege: the police protection citizens are entitled to; the explanations they demand to account for official failure, injustice, or outright malfeasance; and the actions black citizens take in self-defense because of that same failure on the part of the “constituted authorities.” The delegation had called on government officials not in order to gain favor but rather so that they could present demands; they acted on behalf of “the colored citizens.” The “general assurances” offered by the police officials “were in no ways satisfactory...and demand was made upon the officials to state definitely and specifically what had been done....” Houston takes care here as throughout to avoid any appearance of querulousness or hesitation, either in his tone or in the events he describes. He refers throughout his report to “plain speaking” and “square dealing” as a way of asserting the equal standing of the delegation and the officials whom they confront. The report closes with a statement calculated to pre-empt any worries or criticisms that might arise as to the appropriateness of all this conferring with white authorities:

[The] gentlemen gave unsparingly of their time in their efforts to bring order out of confusion, and plainly presented the claims and demands of colored citizens without in any instance surrendering the manhood rights of the race.

“The manhood rights of the race” were in many ways what was at stake in the riot, according to this account. As this document so clearly shows, in both tone and content, African American leaders were in a delicate position. It is unclear how much they had to do with the impetus or the organization of the black resistance in D.C., but in this account they most certainly were cognizant and supportive of it – indeed, as they tell it, they relied upon black action because white officials were so unreliable. The “manliness” of street resistance was unquestioned. These gentlemen’s actions however, in going to the white authorities, could easily have come into question, which is why the report is so emphatic throughout that they never held the supplicant pose, and why it ends with the assurance that they never “in any instance [surrendered] the manhood rights of the race.” The city’s elite was largely aligned with the NAACP, but many were former supporters and beneficiaries of the Tuskegee machine, and therefore likely to be vulnerable to accusations of accommodationism at a moment when such strategies, already losing ground with many people in the city even before Booker T. Washington’s death four years before, were generally discredited.⁴⁰ This document thoroughly endorses that perspective, and it uses manhood, stated as well as implied, in order to do so. As Mark Schneider explains, the NAACP’s most fundamental goal was “full civil and political equality for African Americans.”⁴¹ Houston and his colleagues were simultaneously expressing and enacting that ideal in their confrontation with the city government.

The narrative is undoubtedly self-serving; it portrays the gentlemen’s actions in the best possible light. The priorities and opinions of its audience are known, as is their evaluation of what happened in the city. If the delegations had in fact sounded any note

⁴⁰ Moore, *Leading the Race*, Chapter 9. .

⁴¹ Schneider, 5.

of compromise or subservience in their interactions with white officials, it would have been not only unmanly but worse because unsuccessful, since, as the report states, adequate police protection never actually materialized, and indeed none of the men's demands were ever really met. However they may have painted it, the meetings were clearly never viewed by the white officials in the same terms as their visitors.

Houston et al explicitly reject negative stereotypes by behaving according to shared norms of civilized manhood, and further by pointing deliberately at white men's failure to follow those same norms, whether by participating in mobs or by failing to control them. Houston's narrative enacts both explicitly and by implication a masculinity which is coded to convey class status and to downplay racial difference in one sense while simultaneously asserting that such difference doesn't and ought not to justify unequal protection. The men downplay racial difference perhaps because, as they show, those who emphasize it do so in the service of uncivilized behavior.⁴² The implication is that such emphasis, rather than the fact of racial difference, would be the actual mark of lowness. They substantiate that claim through their own behavior, refuting assumptions about racial characteristics through genteel behavior. This battle of respectability was crucial for elite and middle-class African Americans in this period, and was most visibly played out through gender.⁴³

As in the public debate over lynching, ongoing since the early 1890s, the definition of manhood was central to competing characterizations of the riot. It was crucial for middle-class and elite African American men to claim the position of civilized

⁴² It's worth remembering here that some scholars claim that Washington's black elite would to some extent rather have been identified according to class than to race, although dominant whites had for a long time obstinately ignored transracial attempts at class solidarity by the black elite and middle class in Washington. (see Moore; also my Chapter 2)

⁴³ E.B. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*.

manliness, of restraint brought to the point of violent self-defense by the unjust aggression of the uncivilized mob, by the threat to their homes and families which the proper authorities were unable to contain.⁴⁴ In taking this stance, they were drawing from and reinforcing the work of a number of black activists, most notably Ida B. Wells, the antilynching writer and speaker. Wells was first to bring to the national stage an explicit challenge to the white rape scenario, first in an editorial following the lynching in Memphis of three successful black businessmen and then for years with pamphlets, columns, and national and international speaking tours. Wells explicitly pointed to the behavior and tolerance of southern lynch mobs as an indication of the failure of white Americans to live up to proper ideals of civilization, refuting the white discourse of civilization and the lynching scenario “by inversion,” as Bederman puts it.⁴⁵ She ridiculed the hypocrisy of whites using accusations of black barbarity to justify their own savage behavior – or their tolerance of such savagery in others, and in her self-presentation “[modeled] African Americans’ civilized refinement.”⁴⁶ Likewise, the well-bred behavior, the control, civility, and firmness that Houston reports and denotes with his writing style was crucial in refuting the image of the black rapist putatively at the center of the rioting. It was also central to the claims to citizenship rights according to the ethos of the New Negro which had at its center an unapologetic ideology of self defense.

Alice Wilson and *The Birth of a Nation*

⁴⁴ One interesting irony of this stance was the fact that it refracted the lyncher’s rationalization. Lynchers (and their defenders) claimed that the brutality of black rape forced them to take extralegal action (see Brundage; Dray; Markovitz; Dorr). Neither group felt it could leave justice or the protection of innocents to the justice system. Manhood, racially defined, demanded violent action. Of course there were important differences, not least the respective lived realities.

⁴⁵ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 57. See also, Patricia Schechter, “Unsettled Business: Ida B. Wells Against Lynching, or, How Antilynching Got its Gender” in Brundage, ed., *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁴⁶ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 62.

On page three of the July 25, 1919 issue of the *Washington Post* appears a long article, complete with photograph, about the young widow of Detective Sergeant Harry Wilson, the officer shot on July 22 by Carrie Johnson.⁴⁷ The article works on several levels at once: as news, as human interest feature, as editorial, and as fundraising propaganda. It outlines the plight of the young woman, along with a eulogy for her lost husband, the hero. There is also an implied exhortation, only faintly buried beneath the maudlin prose.

The young widow Wilson is described, along with her infant child, in sentimental and overwrought language. The story opens with an image of forlorn domesticity:

Alone in a tiny frame house beyond the outskirts of Washington, without a relative in the United States except her 2-year-old child, the most pathetic victim of last Monday night's rioting is trying today to solve the problem of her own and her baby's future.

She is a "girl-widow" who has lost her "only protector" and is "utterly unable...to enter into a calm discussion of her affairs [because]...[s]he is still stunned by the swift tragedy." In her youth and helplessness, Alice Wilson embodies the stereotype of imperiled white womanhood which white rioters, like the lynch mobs they emulated, putatively set out to avenge.

The central themes of the article, besides her helplessness, are the heroism of her husband, the community's response, and the righteousness of the *Washington Post* in undertaking to help her. Also running through the article, oddly, is a thread of reproach, whether intentional or not, for the dead husband. He did not subscribe to the policemen's benefit fund or any other mutual benefit society, nor did he carry life insurance. "She

⁴⁷ "Widow Brave in Grief," WP 7/25/1919. All quotes which follow are taken from this article.

must assume this morning the unaided task of giving her fatherless baby a fair chance in life.” This fact is played up in part to push readers to contribute; the writer or perhaps editor’s opinion as to the young hero’s recklessness is difficult to ascertain clearly, but there seem to be hints. The first three sub-headlines in the article denote a certain emphasis: “Faces Task Unaided; In a Lonely Section; Had No Life Insurance.” Even certain items which might appear to be praising him have a certain negative aspect, as when the reporter describes stack of photographs of criminals lying around the small home.

These photographs, Mrs. Wilson explains, tell their own story. Her husband devoted even his leisure hours to the work that claimed all his time when away from home. He was exceedingly ambitious and expected to make a name for himself – a name of which his wife and baby would be proud.

The sergeant’s devotion to his work, his round the clock ambition might also connote a failure to devote himself as fully to his family as his wife might have liked. Combined with the young man’s eagerness to put himself in the forefront when faced with danger and his failure to make arrangements for his family’s future, this note about his bringing work into the domestic space could be read as a critique, at least by some audiences. On the other hand, the young man’s ambition and optimism would for others be entirely admirable. It is impossible to say whether the article’s dual connotations was intentional, designed to satisfy a diverse (white) readership. The critique, if deliberate, seems class-based: a middle class or elite reader would be dismayed by the young man’s failure to think ahead, in both the long term sense of providing for his family, and in the immediate moment of putting himself in danger’s way when such provision had not been made.

“Mrs. Wilson is entirely destitute except for the fund that is being raised for her immediate assistance through the columns of this paper.” The paper is now in the role of rescuer, and through the paper, its readers. At the same time the fund is characterized as a way for citizens to repay their debt to Harry Wilson and to the city’s policemen in general.

A realization of the widow’s dire need, as well as the debt of gratitude which Washington owes her murdered husband, is voiced in many of the letters which have come to The Post with inclosures for the riot victims’ fund.

The article carries the text of two letters from contributors to the fund, both of which reinforce this idea of gratitude and obligation, as well as of the widow’s need. Margaret Wilson is thus dually useful for the paper, and for the city’s white populace: as the metaphorically endangered white woman whose peril ignites the riot, and as the riot victim through whom citizens can redeem the violence by coming to her aid.

For those who would not take the time to read the article, the paper offered a summary. Centered at the top of the page, side by side photos of widow and orphan have a headline reading “Wife and Baby of Young Detective Who Gave His Life in Line of Duty” and their caption says

MRS. ALICE WILSON AND LITTLE MARGARET WILSON left virtually without means of support, when negro’s bullet killed Detective Sergeant Harry Wilson, during the recent rioting. The fund established by The Washington Post is to aid them.

What is important about her story is that she and her daughter are now unsupported, that it was a “negro’s bullet” which brought her to this predicament, and that the *Post* has acted to help her. The offhand masculinization of Carrie Johnson, here no longer a

“negress” further feminizes Mrs. Wilson. Of course the story is designed to inspire sympathy for Mrs. Wilson so that readers will contribute to the fund. But in the larger context of the paper’s treatment of the riot, the portrayal of Wilson, young and helpless, with a newborn at her breast, has a deeper function. The faceless vessel of white womanhood was almost always at the rhetorical (if not the actual) center of white violence against blacks in this period – with the notable exception of riots like the one in Chicago. The figure of Mrs. Wilson functions to some extent in the aftermath of that violence to justify it. Although she is not victimized sexually, she pays a heavy price.

While two detectives, her dead husband’s official associates and close friends endeavored to comfort her with reminiscences of her loved one’s bravery, she sat huddled in a chair, weeping quietly and almost hopelessly. The home to which she came as a bride only three years ago is an exceedingly lonely dwelling place.

Wilson is portrayed very much like a Confederate widow in the post-Reconstruction years – her husband died fighting to protect her and all those she stands for, and the ideals they represent. And as with the portrayal of confederate widows, the paper hints at her continuing peril, and the consequent duty of those who remain to protect her, financially and otherwise. Even the subtle criticism of her husband’s failure to provide for his family holds an echo of the South’s subterranean disappointment in its unsuccessful heroes.⁴⁸

The figure of Alice Wilson as she appears in the *Washington Post* provides a bridge to popular culture in this period, and not simply because the paper’s portrayal of her is so pulpy. The immense success of *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915, and its continuing influence (along with that of the numerous scholarly texts which shared its perspective)

⁴⁸ See Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention Women in the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

on white American ideas about the Civil War and its consequences, provide a lens onto the causes and consequences of the riot, especially in terms of gender.

The movie is a history of the Civil War and Reconstruction, leading into a mythologized telling of the founding of the Ku Klux Klan. The “nation” referred to in the title is the United States, born into its modern form in the fires of the war and Reconstruction. The movie’s narrative holds that the tragedy of the war and its immediate aftermath were brought on by the selfish motives of a few shortsighted white northerners, represented by the character of Congressman Stoneman, a stand-in for Thaddeus Stevens. As the movie tells it, the birth of the Klan into this new nation was an unavoidable effect of the damage done to southern white society by the freeing of the slaves. What the movie does is offer a rationale and even a spur for contemporary white fear and hatred of black people, with almost no exception.⁴⁹

Surrounded by romance, family drama, political/historical argument, epic battle scenes, and all kinds of cinematic innovation, the dramatic and emotional core and indeed the central message of the movie is the frightfulness of black people and the necessity of white solidarity in the face of that threat. Black people represent devastating sexual and cultural danger, both in specific characters and as a mass. The specific menace comes in the forms of the lustful male figures of Gus the rapist and Silas Lynch the mulatto politician, and in the destructive sexual influence of the mulatto Lydia Brown, who the movie suggests is actually the reason for Stoneman’s actions in forcing the nation to war. When we first see her she is Stoneman’s housekeeper, and the caption notes that their

⁴⁹ There are two black characters who are not ruined by the onset of freedom: the “faithful souls,” a mammy and uncle figure who stay with their white family and even violently protect them when danger arises, rescuing the father when he is arrested for being in the KKK, and helping him and his women to escape the black soldiers who have arrested him.

relationship is “The great leader’s weakness that is to blight a nation.” It is no wonder that after seeing this movie white women felt endangered by the mere glance of a black man, or that white people in general felt that the active curtailment of black political and civil and social rights was entirely justified, in fact called for in the interests of preserving civilization itself.

Though based on the writings of Thomas Dixon, the movie draws on other texts as well, notably President Woodrow Wilson’s *History of the American People*, from which provocative characterizations of Reconstruction appeared in a series of captions in the opening minutes of Part Two as follows:

Adventurers swarmed out of the North, as much the enemies of the one race as of the other, to cozen, beguile, and use the negroes.....In the villages the negroes were the office holders, men who knew none of the uses of authority, except its insolences.

The policy of the congressional leaders wrought...a veritable overthrow of civilization in the South.....in their determination to put the white South under the heel of the black South. WOODROW WILSON

The white men were roused by a mere instinct of self-preservationuntil at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan, a veritable empire of the South, to protect the Southern country. WOODROW WILSON⁵⁰

Griffiths is careful to credit these quotes as they appear above, giving his story the highest authority. Wilson had been in office for two years when the film came out. The use of a historical text, and one written by the nation’s president, gave the film scholarly heft to go along with its emotional power and the not-to-be-underestimated effect of its technical innovations and level of spectacle. No one had ever seen a movie like this

⁵⁰ Griffiths is quoting directly from Wilson’s *The American People*.

before. Griffiths' use of the close-up, the long shot, his epic battle scenes, and the ways that he directed his actors, were unprecedented.⁵¹ With this film he created cinematic conventions which continue to be fundamental to filmmaking today – because they work. The film was effective on multiple levels and its pernicious and incendiary consequences were substantial.

The dramatic climax of the movie is a long chase scene, wherein a young white woman (played by America's sweetheart Lillian Gish) who as the "pet" little sister of the hero is the movie's sentimental center, is chased to her death by Gus, a lascivious black Union soldier who has been lurking about (played by a white actor in blackface). In this scene, Griffiths simultaneously drew on conventions of silent film and used innovative techniques to stimulate his audience's fear of the villain and sympathy for the victim. At the end, the young woman – who had first appeared in early scenes of the very long film as an adorable little girl, and who is extremely sympathetic throughout – jumps to her death rather than be touched by her pursuer. Because she has not been signaled as a tragic figure before this scene, her death is shocking, and moved audiences to great upset. Her brother's revenge on Gus, in the form of a KKK "fair" trial and execution, is absolutely justified in the film's moral universe; and the scenario displayed here is the central myth in the decades-long context of American lynching.

The movie's task is to explain and validate white supremacy and violence in the United States. Using the story of the Civil War and Reconstruction, Griffiths describes African Americans in the basest stereotypes, even as he calls for white unity across sectional barriers. The bitterness between former combatants disappears in the face of the

⁵¹Daniel Bernardi, "Introduction: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema." In Daniel Bernardi, ed., *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

real enemy, and the whites who are blind to this evil are themselves instruments of great harm to their fellows – whether in the form of Stoneman whose “great weakness” (his love of a scheming, grasping mulatto woman) brings the nation to war, or the “scalawag” white sergeant who leads the brutal black soldiers in Piedmont. Other misguided whites aid in the criminal enterprise of giving the franchise to ignorant and corrupt black voters while preventing the whites from voting, or simply stand aside as the feminized, shawl-wearing Stoneman wreaks his egotistical havoc on the nation.

Cultural historians of this period argue that filmgoing was one of a number of ways that new Americans became more American, a way for people to bond across their various differences.⁵² *The Birth of a Nation* provided a means for bonding across class, culture, region, and experience, unless you were black – and amongst African Americans it roused a strong protest movement, thus ironically bonding them as well. The film provided an unequivocal lesson in American history, numerous points of emotional contact and identification, and a very visible and uncomplicated common enemy.

It is no wonder that African Americans protested the screening of the film, and that it provided a galvanizing point for the NAACP, even drawing many new members into the young organization. President Wilson showed it at the White House – it was the first film to be screened there.⁵³ His subsequent categorical praise of it as “all so terribly true,” and “like writing history with lightning,” was an outright thumbing of his nose at the country’s black population, and indeed at anyone who held to a different interpretation of the events leading to and out of the Civil War, or of the role that African

⁵² Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

⁵³ Tuttle, *Race Riot*, 230.

Americans ought to play in American society.⁵⁴ Praise like this, from various quarters, helped push African Americans and others into the streets and the courts to protest its showing in venues across the country. In New York City, “Jewish and Protestant religious leaders, and the flower of reform (Addams, Wald, Wise, Villard) [marched] in lockstep with the NAACP to city hall” to protest the movie and try to prevent it being shown there. In his biography of W.E.B. Du Bois, David Levering Lewis says, in fact, that the movie and the NAACP “helped make each other.”⁵⁵

The fact that it was the most popular silent movie ever made, and that it was revived annually through the 20s, testifies to its contemporary and continuing power and relevance for a substantial number of whites.⁵⁶ A significant part of the film’s effect lay in the newness of the medium. Philip Dray points out that at this point

no one yet felt comfortable saying how significant or powerful a societal force film really was. Audience members seated in the front rows of a theater in 1915 still tended to jump out of their seats when a locomotive came toward the camera; it was not clear how and to what extent viewers related what they saw on screen to real life.⁵⁷

Given the fact that at this point the line between filmic and actual reality was not altogether clear to many viewers, *The Birth of a Nation* both demonstrated and reinforced the historical and enduring potency of the rape scenario and widespread U.S. comfort with the idea and reality of brutal violence against African Americans.

⁵⁴ Lewis, *Du Bois*, 506. Though scholars note that the Wilson quote may be apocryphal, that possibility ultimately seems irrelevant, because people believed he had said it – it was entirely feasible – and perhaps more significantly, because his book was the authority for the movie’s “historical” account.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 507, 508.

⁵⁶ Bernardi, *passim*.

⁵⁷ Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, 196-97.

In *The Birth of a Nation* D.W. Griffiths deliberately codified a number of fundamental American racial myths, at a time in the nation's history when those myths were close to the center of public consciousness. This was for contradictory reasons: because of the ascendance and perpetuation of Jim Crow laws and practices, and because Jim Crow – and its attendant brutality – while essentially unchecked, was nonetheless under attack by a growing number of African Americans around the country. This reaction manifested in multiple ways, through outright economic, social, and political assertiveness, from newspaper editorials to migration north and including the simple defiance of oppressive social practices and the threat of violence that lay beyond them. Black people were persecuted, sometimes to the point of death, for failing to be properly deferential – for succeeding in business, for questioning bookkeeping practices in sharecropping contracts, for failing to step aside on a narrow sidewalk, for coming home with an education or in uniform.

By reinforcing stereotypes that painted African Americans as degraded, animalistic, lustful, disloyal, and easily led, Griffiths and others rationalized and shored up a system of racial hierarchy which held blacks at the bottom. Contemporaneous with the period's intense nativism and general xenophobia, the anti-black propaganda of artifacts like *The Birth of a Nation* provided a point of unity for recent arrivals with more established groups like those who rioted in Chicago. It also gave African Americans incontrovertible evidence of what they were up against, and was an impetus for politicization and activism, cultural as well as civil.

The actions of Carrie Johnson and Evelyn Mitchell in the midst of anarchic violence both challenged and ironically reinforced gender norms. Each of them acted

heroically according to her respective circumstances in efforts to counteract the unrestrained aggression then rampant in the city. Mitchell went out that night “to prove that a white woman could do it.” She was explicitly acting as a woman rather than in spite of being one; she did not claim a male prerogative, but rather claimed for white women the right to act as she did. In fact, she did what a white man clearly could not. Any white man other than a policeman who went where she did that night would likely have been shot. Carrie Johnson likewise took action which a man in her position could not have done. Had her father shot Harry Wilson, he would probably, like the other black men charged during the riot, have paid an immediate and excessive legal penalty – had he survived the mob waiting outside their house. So she, like Mitchell, in the context of the riot appropriated a form of male action as specifically female. Johnson was protecting her home, her father, her own body.

Of course there are substantial dissimilarities in their stories: Johnson acted in urgent response to an immediate menace and Mitchell out of choice, and it is easy to see how their relative racial positions were reflected in the levels of exigency they faced. But these differences do not obviate the parallels. In the context of extreme exigency and uncertainty each woman took action in defiance or abandonment of certain feminine norms, but in doing so each was asserting a deeper level of gendered imperative.

Johnson was protecting her home, her father, her own body. In a simple inversion, she made use of her femaleness to soften the violence of her action. It would have been easier to criminalize and pathologize the shooting had her father been the gunman, but in Johnson’s narrative, for a young girl to shoot, the fear and danger must have been

extreme.⁵⁸ Indeed, this explanation was the basis for her eventual legal vindication. Her youth and her gender served to confound would-be white critics – she received relatively little attention in the press because she was so removed from the usual, successful image of the dangerous African American. The same characteristics gained her the approbation and protectiveness of African Americans, who took up collections for her defense and called her a “little heroine.”⁵⁹ Though no one seems to have openly acknowledged it, Carrie Johnson also represented other black women who had taken up arms to protect homes, selves, and families, and in a sense her vindication was theirs.

In her turn, Mitchell was attempting to make right the wrongs of the mob. She traded on her gender privilege to venture out where no white man would go, and to speak freely and comfortably with men who many white women would have tried hard to avoid. The righteousness of her purpose in hoping to comfort black Washingtonians combined with her desire to “show that a white woman could do it” reveal that she too was employing through inversion ideas of female vulnerability in order to accomplish a kind of heroic rescue.

Men like William Houston were explicitly, in their every word and action, working to refute negative stereotypes of black men and particularly in their case, of black leaders. Their insistence on asserting and maintaining a virtuous and courageous masculinity, on making demands without ever “surrendering the manhood rights of the race” was as central to their activism as the actions themselves. This is not to say that their entire focus was on what whites said or thought about them and other blacks, it is rather to say that they were aware of and actively working to undo the real damage – or in

⁵⁸ The sniping which supposedly provoked the police incursion is bypassed in this narrative.

⁵⁹ “Contribute to the Hart Defense Fund,” *Bee*, 8/16/1919.

some cases excuses for damage – those stereotypes wrought.⁶⁰ At the same time they were expressing and enacting the New Negro imperative of self defense and righteous demand ascendant in their social and political world.

The Washington *Post* story of Alice Wilson relied on unambiguous stereotypes of womanhood. The plight of the young woman alone, a “girl-widow” living with her equally defenseless infant daughter “in a lonely section” of the city, was one which could reliably be expected to simultaneously provoke sympathy for her and anger at the cause of her predicament. Just as the paper had incited whites to anger and violence toward their black fellow-citizens for weeks with overwrought stories of black men victimizing white women, it put the one-dimensional figure of the widow to work validating that same anger and violence, and the power relations it was designed to maintain.

The obvious power of such stereotypes demonstrates the force and centrality of ideologies of gender and race, intertwined and dynamic. In looking at these various experiences of the D.C. riot we can see that ideas about gender and race, about what it meant to be a man or a woman, black or white, worked both to motivate actions and to explain them. Conceptions of self and other based on such ideas also functioned as interpretive mechanisms, ways to understand and explain the world, and to reinforce deeply held notions of how the world ought to be. Profound contestation between race and gender ideologies, and consequently over the definition of civilization and who was capable or incapable of it, were also at play here, and because racial violence was at the heart of U.S. history and contemporary experience, the riot was both arena and medium for this contest. The subsequent battle over the riot’s causes and consequences provided further ground for the struggle.

⁶⁰ Houston document, NAACP Archives, D.C. Branch files, G34, LOC.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Seeking The Cause”¹

Radical propaganda has made noteworthy headway among the colored people in this country during the past three months. Since the demobilization of the colored [battalions], the grievances of colored officers and enlisted men against white officers for alleged discriminatory treatment, and the absence of color prejudice among the French, as noted by the colored soldiers in A.E.F., have become matters of common knowledge among the colored people of this country. As a consequence, there is now a more fertile soil in which to plant seeds of extreme radicalism. The avidity with which the newspaper-reading negroes are buying and reading a periodical like THE MESSENGER demonstrates this fact.²

The riot in Washington, D.C. was major national news. Other racial clashes were covered in big city papers, but “race war” in the nation’s capital was particularly alarming. This was especially true in the context of 1919 when even by July there had already been many more racial “disturbances” than usual, and the riot received extensive attention across the country. In his biography of William Randolph Hearst, David Nasaw observes,

News is not a phenomenon that exists in the real world, waiting to be discovered. Wars have been fought, tornadoes have raged, and hundreds of thousands of innocents have been slaughtered without ever becoming “news.” An event becomes news only when journalists and editors decide to record it. More often than not, what determines whether an occurrence is newsworthy or not is the ease with which it can be plotted and narrated so that readers will want to read about it. If there are no discernible heroes or villains, no mysteries to uncover, no climaxes, denouements, triumphs

¹ “Seeking the Cause,” editorial, Chicago *Defender*, 8/2/1919.

² J.E. Cutler, “The Negro Situation,” 8/15/1919 Memo to Director of Military Intelligence, Glasser files, 10218-364, RG 60, National Archives.

or failures, if no one wins or loses in the end, then there is no story to tell.³

The D.C. riot provided juicy ingredients for all kinds of storytellers. The elements of a familiar, and for many people perversely reassuring, American story were all there – archetypal heroes, villains, and victims; dramatic battles, thrilling chases, even a confounding mystery – who was the original, maniacal rapist? White papers around the country repeated the story as the Associated Press sent it to them: white military men in the nation’s capital, enraged beyond control by repeated attacks on helpless white women, began attacking black men on the streets of the city, seeking vengeance and justice. Though recast in an urban context, and on a larger scale, the Washington riot stories in daily papers were a retelling of the post-Reconstruction rape scenario, with familiar characters and denouement. The irony of the story’s being set on the streets of the capital served to reify and underscore its status as a fundamental myth.

For African Americans around the country the story was familiar too, but it was the opposite of comforting. Weekly black papers also made dramatic use of the riot, and for various reasons tended to draw larger lessons from it than their white counterparts. For such publications and their readers, this riot, like other violent episodes of the summer, was an object lesson not just in white intransigence and savagery, but also in black determination, courage, and virtue. In the thinking and discourse of middle-class and elite African Americans, this was a contest between civilizations, proof to those who could see it that the white man’s accusations of black backwardness were a monumental projection.

³ David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 102-103.

There were, however, certain kinds of conclusions about the riot that observers with very different perspectives shared. They all understood the black experience of the war to be causally connected to the way the D.C. riot played out. Some believed that wartime service, and in particular the generally positive French treatment of black troops had engendered or encouraged ideas about “social equality” – or at least fairness – among blacks in and out of the military. Others argued that disappointment at the mistreatment of black soldiers by the U.S. military establishment at home and abroad had deepened black anger and fed the determination to wait no longer for things to change. The majority probably saw it as a combination of both these factors. Harry Haywood, who had served in France and who would eventually find his way to the Communist Party, described his anger and determination to fight American racism as arising from the combination.⁴ Analyses of causes came from across the political and racial spectrums, and their attendant interpretations of course varied, but there was a nearly universal sense that the war had created a substantial change in black attitudes and approaches to inferior social status, and that the Washington riot was one manifestation of this change. As one white MID analyst put it, “Beyond a doubt, there is a new negro to be reckoned with in our political and social life.”⁵ Whether the shift was deplored, celebrated, or something in between, it was recognized as real and significant.

This chapter looks at how the story of the riot was told and analyzed over time around the country in a variety of venues, including in big city white dailies, weekly black papers, and other kinds of periodicals. Some of the black papers – the *Chicago Defender*, for instance – were distributed nationally, often clandestinely, by Pullman

⁴ Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, Chapters 2 and 3.

⁵ Maj. J.E. Cutler, “The Negro Situation,” Memo to the Director of MI, 8/15/1919, Glasser files, 10218-364, RG 60, National Archives.

porters and others whose work took them into regions where black newspapers, if they existed, might be constrained in both content and opinion by the danger of white reaction. We will also glance at some government memos and internal organizational communications. The first two sections of the chapter look at news reports of the riot in white and black periodicals, respectively. The third examines chronologically the more analytic commentaries that appeared in white and black publications in the days and weeks following the riot, as well as the private notes of other sources. Many discuss not only Washington but subsequent (and occasionally prior) events in other cities, in their efforts to explain what was happening to the nation's racial status quo, and to predict or determine what was to come.

The riot in Washington provided a focus and a case in point for commentators, an opportunity to express their views about race, racial politics, and the future of the country. The people who were more deeply affected by the riot were those who saw it as an opening, as either an expansion of possibilities for black people or a moment of intensification in a period of deepening racial difficulty. In either view, the riot represented a moment of danger and possibility. The observations and analyses in this chapter range from economic to social darwinist; commentators used events in Washington to rationalize and justify segregation and lynching, to prove that white Americans were uncivilized and deeply hypocritical, to call for interracial understanding and unity. Many of the discussions of the riot could be mistaken for specimens from all sides of the civil rights debates of the mid-twentieth century in their language and agendas. All of them show that the preoccupation with race relations and racial violence was already well-established as an item of great importance on the U.S. agenda in 1919.

White Dailies Around the Nation

The national coverage of the riot was virtually the same in each of the five major daily city papers I looked at for the period July 20 through July 31, 1919. *The New York Times* (NYT), *The Boston Daily Globe* (BDG), *The Atlanta Constitution* (AC), *The Chicago Daily Tribune* (CDT), and *The Los Angeles Times* (LAT) all used the Associated Press (AP) for their stories on the riot, though the NYT carried supplemental reports as well. In fact, much of the language was identical, with the exception of headlines and to some extent organization. There was not much variation in the emphasis or framing of the stories: all pointed to white men's retaliation for attacks by black men on white women as the precipitating cause, noted the substantial presence of military men in the initial phases of the fighting, when blacks were primarily victims, and by Tuesday the 22nd were characterizing African Americans as the assailants in most clashes. There was some variation in the amount of detail from one paper to the next, but the source material for all four papers appears to have been identical. The AP was sometimes credited in the bylines, and those accounts were substantially the same as what appeared in the *Washington Post* (WP).

For each of the six days under consideration, July 20 through July 25, at least two of the papers carried some mention of the fighting in Washington. On Sunday July 20, it appeared only in the New York and Boston papers, which had small pieces on interior pages, each emphasizing servicemen reacting angrily to "assaults on white women by negroes."⁶ At this early point the fighting was seen as a minor event, sure to pass with the weekend. On Monday the 21st, readers in New York, Atlanta, and Chicago learned from

⁶ "Race Riot at Capital," *New York Times* (NYT), 7/20/19; "Service Men in Race Riot in Washington," *Boston Daily Globe* (BDG), 7/20/1919.

front page stories that there was continuing fighting in the capital, and again the stories (and some of the headlines) foregrounded the idea that white attackers were retaliating for “assaults” or “attacks” on white women in the capital. As the *Constitution* put it, “Considerable feeling has been aroused here recently by the numerous attacks on white women by negroes, the latest victim of which was said to have been the wife of a sailor and which resulted in the organizing effort for revenge last night.”⁷

All five papers carried page one stories about the riot on Tuesday, and all but two (the CDT and the LAT) mentioned in their headlines Carrie Johnson’s shooting of Harry Wilson. All the papers told some version of the actions of the “young negress” (though not all named her, and she was given different ages). She was not portrayed in any detail, though, simply mentioned as the shooter. The *Globe* – or its sources – seems to have taken a bit of license, adding a second “negress,” who “opened fire” from across the street but did not hit anyone.⁸ Tuesday’s headlines in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Constitution* referred to the fighting as “race war,” while all the other headlines in all five papers that week used “riot” or “rioting” and at times “clashes.”

All the Tuesday stories dwelt on the number of casualties, though each had a different number. They all mentioned the numerous episodes on streetcars, and somewhere in their stories emphasized the fact that black people in Washington were armed and in many cases working in concert. The *Tribune’s* version is representative:

Police reports are that bands of armed Negroes, hundreds of them carrying revolvers, razors, and blackjacks, are

⁷ “Service Men Beat Negroes in Race Riot at Capital,” NYT 7/21/1919; “More Clashes Between Races in Washington,” Chicago *Daily Tribune* (CDT), 7/21/1919; “Racial Clashes at Washington,” Atlanta *Constitution* (AC) 7/21/1919.

⁸ No one else, including the Washington papers, mentions this second woman anywhere. Also, in a curiously lurid note, the *Globe* item ends with the detail that Carrie Johnson was “shot through the hips” in the uproar. Her father Benjamin appears nowhere in any of the stories.

congregating in various parts of the city and are making vicious attacks on all men in uniform and scores of street cars.⁹

This depiction, however accurate, was phrased for maximum alarm. The NYT's second headline was "Armed and Defiant Negroes Roam About Shooting at Whites." The Tuesday stories also carried a fair amount of detail, describing specific incidents and often giving names of the dead and wounded, most of whom were police. The stories, like those in the *Washington Post*, convey a strong sense of the city's chaos, with widespread fighting, multiple and varied injuries to all kinds of people, and city authorities unable to gain control.

The Wednesday papers carried more riot stories than any other day. All focused on the death of Isaac W. Halbfinger and his cohort Benny Belmont, the two Home Guards shot at Ninth and M streets Tuesday night.¹⁰ *The New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* carried large headlines on this shooting, and built their riot coverage for Wednesday's papers around the story. In the NYT, a second story was headlined "NEGROES AGAIN RIOT IN WASHINGTON, KILLING WHITE MAN." It is difficult to know what exactly to make of the universal highlighting of this particular shooting. The reporters' apparent horror at the shooting matches and even surpasses that connected to the shootings of police officers. Perhaps the wartime ubiquity of vigilante organizations like the Home Guards and the American Protective League in various cities around the country, their direct relationship to the period's paranoia and neighborly surveillance, gave members a degree of power and impunity which made the idea of

⁹ CDT, 7/22/1919 ; NYT, 7/22/1919; BDG, 7/22/1919; AC, 7/22/1919; Los Angeles *Times* (LAT), 7/22/1919.

¹⁰ This is the incident described so differently by William Houston (see Chapter Two , p. 51).

defying them difficult to conceive. Such an attitude would explain why resistance that went as far as shooting gained so much attention.

Almost all Wednesday's riot stories carried identical language in an early paragraph (this is taken from the opening paragraph of the CDT story):

Race hatred in the national capital, engendered by attacks on white women by negroes and fanned by three successive nights of rioting, found expression again tonight in clashes between whites and negroes.¹¹

The stories also mentioned the fact that another white woman had been attacked during the rioting, and they did not fail to leave out the detail that "she escaped only when all but stripped of her clothing." Another common feature of the stories, echoing again the *Washington Post*, appeared thus in the *Atlanta Constitution*:

While rioting was at its worst downtown, panic stricken negroes fired indiscriminately from the barricaded doors or windows of their homes. Others whirled through more outlying streets in automobiles firing wildly at any whites they saw.¹²

As with similar characterizations in the *Post*, such depictions of the city's black population served to feed white fears and at the same time painted the actions blacks had taken in response as wild, irrational, and unorganized. But it seems clear that many if not most of those who were shooting from their homes and patrolling their neighborhoods were acting quite deliberately and rationally, not to mention effectively. As for those taking advantage of the turmoil to commit crimes or simply to act out, it is likely that there were members of both races doing so.

¹¹ CDT, 7/23/1919; BDG, 7/23/1919; LAT, 7/23/1919; AC, 7/23/1919.

¹² AC, 7/23/1919.

The level of organization among black citizens, and the fear it engendered, comes across in reports of rumors like one in the *Constitution* warning “that a large crowd of negroes had gathered in Hyattsville, [Maryland]...and were moving toward Washington.” The story goes on to say that authorities had dispatched troops to the District line, and the supposed gathering is never mentioned again. It seems safe to say that had the troops encountered such a gathering, there would have been reports of the confrontation. Other papers also mention rumors of blacks gathering outside the city, but none of these rumors is borne out. It seems that such stories were inspired by the organized response of the city’s black population, which created an inference that others might also be involved, and that the level of organization was wider. Rumors like these are not unusual in the midst of such turmoil; black Washingtonians were worrying at the same time about an intensification of the white mob.

Wednesday’s papers also reported that President Wilson met with Secretary of War Newton Baker, and that Wilson was, according to the *Constitution*, “much concerned” and even, as Chicagoans were told, “alarmed.” The president may have been unaware previously of the events taking place outside his front door because he was away on a cruise down the Potomac on Saturday and Sunday, according to official reports.¹³ He may actually have been quite ill by this time, already embarked on the decline of which few people were aware until after his stroke in October. This could account for his failure to declare martial law in the city, a move many in congress were calling for, and which people thought was imminent. As the papers noted however, Secretary Baker had put General William Haan in charge of the military effort to contain the rioting. This

¹³ WP 7/20/1919.

involved the mobilization of some 2,000 white troops, including machine gun batteries, infantry, cavalry and marines.

Thursday's papers were terse. Typical headlines read, "CHECK WASHINGTON RIOT;" "CAPITAL QUIET AFTER RIOTING." Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Thursday's coverage was the centrality of the comments of California Representative Julius Kahn, who in a speech quoted at length in several articles (including the *Washington Post*) blamed Prohibition for the rioting in the nation's capital. Kahn's logic was that dry laws encouraged lawlessness, functioning as a kind of gateway to chaos because they "tended to lessen the average citizen's respect for all law." People who had broken dry laws "[did] not take long to commit felonies" and in the Washington riot the nation was "reaping the whirlwind" for having enacted the ill-advised legislation. Furthermore, for Kahn the fact that Prohibition was a constitutional amendment made the situation "all the more serious" because it bred contempt for all law. "The continuance of such a condition will ultimately lead to anarchy."¹⁴ This analysis of the riot is particularly interesting because nowhere in his statement did Kahn blame black people for the violence, contrary to the assertion of the LAT headline ("Representative Kahn Says Negro Mob Spirit Due to Prohibition"). Though this article quotes him at length, the only direct reference he makes to race in the statement is an allusion to despotic regimes around the world being able to point to how poorly the supposedly enlightened U.S. treats "people who are considered of an inferior race. It is a sad commentary on our vaunted, but seemingly forgotten, spirit of tolerance."¹⁵ Even where he mentions bootleggers and other liquor law breakers he never characterizes them racially. The Los Angeles paper's

¹⁴ BDG 7/24/1919.

¹⁵ LAT 7/24/1919.

insertion of racial blame in its headlines without bearing it out in the body of the story shows how headlines commonly worked in the race-baiting that was so crucial to the violence, in this episode as in many others.

In a related but alternative view of the connection between dry laws and the riot, some black pastors, including Dr. Waldron of Shiloh Baptist Church, blamed prohibition laws for the trouble because they had put the “evil forces” to work disrupting peace in the city. The former owners of “assignment houses,” along with “liquor people” and “gamblers” were all “mad” because they had been or were in the process of being closed down and put out of business. These groups were trying “to discredit the police department and they buy the press and by scare-heads do all they can to try to tell the people that without their business going on, the city cannot rest in peace.”¹⁶ According to Arthur Waskow, the publisher of the *Washington Post* in this period, Ned McLean, “especially objected to tough police enforcement of Prohibition,” and had been “hounding” the police in his paper with the “negro crime wave” stories all summer. If this is true, Waldron was right that McLean was acting in service of the liquor interests, whether or not he was being paid by them to do so.¹⁷ Another liquor-connected but unsupported explanation appeared in a MID report (which contained some other questionable items). According to this agent,

the riot was the outcome apparently of a quarrel between white Southern soldiers, who became enraged after they found out that the liquor they had purchased – about 15 or 20 quarts – was nothing more than tea with a little whiskey on top of the tea. The soldiers came back and demanded their money.

¹⁶ “Colored Meeting at Shiloh Baptist Church Relative to Race Riots” Memo, 7/28/1919, “Negro Subversion” file, 10218-350, RG 165, National Archives.

¹⁷ Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-in*, 22.

The item never says exactly who the soldiers had bought the liquor from, nor how they responded to the demand for money, but rather moves into a description of the military maneuvers of these soldiers during the riot. No other reports agree with this one in portraying the white mob behaving “upon military lines,” or as making their own ammunition, or using hand grenades or deploying automobiles in an organized attack.¹⁸

On Friday, July 25th the Washington riot disappeared from the nation’s front pages. The only mention appeared in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* on page four: “FRENCH ASSERT U.S. RIOTS MEAN NEGROES’ REVOLT; Papers Say Lack of Color Line Abroad Impressed Colored Yanks.”¹⁹ This kind of story invoked amongst whites the demon of black desire for “social equality” and blamed it on their experience abroad. This idea, that blacks who had served abroad had been spoiled by the license they were granted in France, was widespread, and directly connected to a great deal of racial violence, especially against black soldiers, in the post-war period. It was certainly part of the impetus for the Washington riot. Though the article is simply a summary of editorials in two French papers, and nowhere says anything about interracial socializing, such an implication would have arisen readily in the minds of white readers.

On Friday all five of the papers carried small items about a lynching in Gilmer, Texas – in Atlanta and Chicago it appeared on the front page. A young black man accused of attacking a white woman was taken from the city jail (which the mob broke into with sledgehammers), dragged by his neck behind a horse, and hung in the courthouse square. Such items were commonplace in daily papers in the U.S., and might not normally have raised many eyebrows, at least among whites. The context of the riot,

¹⁸ “Negro Agitation,” Memo, 7/1/1919 [*sic* – maybe 7/31?], Glasser files, 10218-364, RG 60, National Archives.

¹⁹ CDT 7/25/1919.

however, makes this lynching appear particularly significant—a kind of alternative version of the week’s events.

Another lynching item, this from Georgia, appeared in some of that day’s papers. Berry Washington, an elderly black man, was lynched after he shot a young white man who, along with a friend, was attacking two young black women in the house next door to his own. According to the A.P. story, the men had actually chased the two victims from their own home after firing a shot through the front door, and were actually tearing up the floor of the porch under which they were hiding. Washington came out of his house in response to the screams of the two girls, their young siblings, and their mother. Defying the white men’s command that he go back inside or be killed, Washington shot and killed one of them, while the other escaped.

Washington, 70 years old, had then given himself up to the police.

At midnight a mob of seventy-five or 100 men took Washington out of jail and carried him to Milan, where he was lynched over the spot where Dandy [the would-be rapist] was killed. He was hanged to a post and his body riddled with bullets.²⁰

Again, a typical news item, not at all unusual in the nation’s daily papers. Would a reader have found it portentous, after reading about the rioting in the capital for three or four days? It is deeply significant for our purposes to understand how common these stories were, and how powerful that very familiarity was in shaping the national consciousness.

African American Papers

Though there were scores of black newspapers in the U.S. in 1919, none were dailies, and so African Americans got their immediate news from the white papers. In a

²⁰ “Negro, Defending Women, Is Lynched.:Georgia Mob Avenges Slaying Of White Man Who Made Vicious Attack,” LAT 7/26/1919.

sense, then, much of the black newspaper coverage of the riot in Washington was challenging and corrective of white news, as well as analytic and editorial. For example, when *Crisis*, the monthly organ of the NAACP, printed a report on the riot by James Weldon Johnson in September, it was intended to fill out and personalize a story most of his readers already knew, rather than to present a more general picture of what had happened.²¹

The *Washington Bee* opened its July 26 front page article with the statement “The Nation’s Capital is in disgrace.” The story revises considerably the picture presented in the *Post* and other white papers, describing a black populace organized and steady rather than panic stricken, and taking the police authorities to task for their failure to contain the white mob. The opening paragraph also alludes to the Carrie Johnson shooting (though it gets the day wrong):

Wednesday night the home of a colored woman in the northwest was broken into, and she deliberately killed the detective.²²

The writer actively contradicts both tone and content of the white papers’ depiction of this event. In one cool sentence, Johnson is a woman protecting her home in the context of an invasion. She is purposeful and righteous, not an animalistic “negress” shooting “wildly” at a courageous policeman. This reading is sustained on the editorial page, though with an inconsistency typical of the *Bee*:

The *Bee* regrets the death of Detective Wilson. He can only blame himself.... Did he have the right to invade the home of the person who shot him? Did he see a felony committed? Did he witness a murderous assault? If he did,

²¹ See Chapter 3 of this dissertation for details of Johnson’s report.

²² “Colored Americans’ Reward,” *Bee* 7/26/1919

he was justified in entering and his assailant should be punished; if not, he had no right to enter this home.

The implication, in the context of the front-page story and of the editorial complaint (two paragraphs earlier) of the authorities' failure to protect the homes and persons of the city's African Americans, is that Wilson's entry into Johnson's home was not, in fact, justified.

The *Bee*'s story is chronologically unspecific, and there are a number of confusing inconsistencies, as if it had been transcribed and not edited. It resembles the *Post* coverage in places, in that it is essentially a list of separate events, names, locations, and other specifics about individuals who were injured. It reads chaotically too, jumping from one moment to another. But the *Bee* casts the story very differently:

The Colored Boulevard, known from You street to New Jersey avenue, was thronged with colored citizens Wednesday night. A report was circulated that eight hundred white men were marching up New Jersey avenue to invade the colored section. Colored men on bicycles went from house to house apprising the colored householders, who prepared themselves to meet the invaders.²³

This and other passages describe the black populace as strong, organized, and ready rather than terrified or hapless as in the *Post*.

A colored boy at Seventh and T streets was arrested by four officers, and he cried 'Help!' Hundreds of colored men came to his assistance and cleared the neighborhood.

The Bee also offers details like names of police officers and their locations and actions.

The paper does not mention whether the officers it names were African American, which

²³ Ibid. The paper often replaced the letter names of Washington streets with words, as in "You" for U, or "Eye" for I.

might account for their being mentioned so specifically. Or it may be that the named officers were white and happened to be known among the city's black population. There is also a brief, slightly confusing note on the presence of Major Pullman, the police superintendent, in the black neighborhood around U street:

For some time Major Pullman was conspicuous in this section, and he made himself conspicuously absent when it was circulated that he was in this section. The Major made an effort with the marines and sailors to disperse the mob. Many arrests were made in this precinct.

The *Bee*'s editorial style makes the story read like the chaotic and emotional initial recounting of an individual or group of witnesses – which, given the state of publishing technology, it may well have been.

The image of a young woman forced by an assailant or a group of assailants to strip naked figured in black riot stories as well as white. The *Bee* juxtaposed this humiliation with group triumph and individual helplessness:

In the southwest the colored population held its own. Ethiopia reigned supreme in this section, with but one exception. A colored young woman was caught in a white neighborhood by four white men. She was made to undress and compelled to walk out of the neighborhood in a nude condition. A colored man, who saw her, ran for help, but he could not find anyone to go with him to the scene of the outrage to protect this young woman.²⁴

The figure of an unprotected woman – stripped naked – symbolizing the victimization of the race and intended to stir men to action was, clearly, potent for the expression of both domination and transgression, on either side of the color line. The use of such images was an overwhelmingly common tactic of nationalistic movements around the world over the

²⁴ Ibid.

course of the twentieth century. The female stood for the nation, whether as victim, herald, or triumphant leader, depending on the context. In addition to the possibility that groups of black and white men may actually have perpetrated this particular, very fraught form of abuse on individual women during the riot, it seems significant that both black and white accounts of the riot included at least one exercise of this highly gendered trope.

That week's Baltimore *Afro-American* appeared on Friday the 25th, and its relatively short riot story had the same July 23 dateline as the *Bee*, so it's likely the same deadline pressures were at play. The *Afro-American*'s headlines asserted "SOLDIERS TRY TO TERRORIZE COLORED FOLK" and the story's first paragraph offered both analysis and warning:

The majority of the casualties are white showing that the colored population was well armed and able to take care of itself. The city is quiet now, but the colored population is still under arms and ready for a renewal of the conflict.²⁵

The article states that the riot occurred because white military men held "the whole colored population of Washington numbering 100,000 persons responsible for the recent assaults on white women." According to the *Afro-American*, blacks in D.C. did not organize their resistance until Monday, when

the colored people, infuriated by the inability of the police to afford protection retaliated by shooting and beating every white person that came into the Southwest section. Motormen and conductors were pulled off street cars, and armed men in motor cars took pot shots at police and whites wherever these showed themselves.²⁶

The article ends with a brief description of two shootings by African Americans, Carrie Johnson and Micajah Walker, the government worker attacked while riding on his

²⁵ Baltimore *Afro-American* (BAA), 7/25/1919.

²⁶ Ibid.

motorcycle.²⁷ The central thread of the *Afro-American's* coverage is the manhood of the black defenders. In its language and its choice of incidents the paper works to portray whites as cowardly and reactive, the police as useless, and black citizens as purposeful, calm, and courageous.

The Baltimore paper's editorial for that day opened with a reference that was clearly on the minds of many African Americans: "The only thing that kept the Washington riots from causing as severe a loss of life as the East St. Louis massacre was the preparedness of Washington's colored population." It went on to praise the city's black men for refraining from aggression until "human nature could stand it no longer and in pure defense groups of men in fifties and hundreds went out to show the attackers that the colored population was not altogether defenceless.[sic]"²⁸ The reference to East St. Louis was not haphazard; nor was the fact that this language echoed that used by whites to validate their own violent actions against blacks, in this and countless other instances.

The front page of the July 26 edition of the *New York Age* (NYA) was covered with items about the riot. The lead story opened with recent historical context and political critique, flipping the "crime wave" picture along with the blame for the week's events.

For the past six weeks the colored citizens of the District of Columbia have been terrorized by the 'cracker' class which has invaded the city throughout the present administration, and this reign of terror reached boiling point last Saturday evening....²⁹

²⁷ See Chapter Two of this dissertation.

²⁸ BAA, 7/25/1919.

²⁹ *New York Age* (NYA), 7/26/1919.

The *Age* story detailed a number of specific attacks on black men, and emphasized the fact that in “each and every instance one colored man was attacked by two or more sailors or soldiers.” In describing the actions of Carrie Johnson, the *Age*, a conservative paper, said that she was “guarding her home.”

Lower on the page a headline exclaiming “EXTRA!” announces “DAILY PRESS INCITES RIOTS, SAYS PULLMAN” and the item reports that Chief Pullman stated to J.W. Johnson and a delegation that “sensational accounts in the Washington dailies incited the riots and that the soldiers and sailors were first aggressors.” The *Age* was focused on the role of white military men in the fighting, and on the helplessness of the city’s police force, notwithstanding reports on the efforts of police officials. Other reports, including Johnson’s, do not substantiate what the *Age* says about Pullman blaming the daily papers for incitement.

The paper reprinted in full the text of a petition which had been presented to the city’s Board of Commissioners by a group of African American leading citizens and organizations decrying the lawlessness and calling for action. Noting that the trouble was allowed to recur after Saturday night, the petition asserts that this recurrence “proves the existence of a sentiment which, if not repressed might easily breed trouble of a still more serious character; and who of us can foresee the end of such a dilemma?” Like other statements from black groups and individuals, this one deplores “as deeply as any one can, the alleged crimes which appear to be taken as the immediate cause of the lawless outbreaks...and we stand ready to do all in our power to apprehend and bring to justice the perpetrators....” It goes on to remind its readers that most of the city’s African

Americans are “law-abiding, peaceable, unoffending (except, through the accident of skin color)” and ends with a warning:

It is not necessary for us to say that a situation like this might very easily be converted into a two-edged sword. And then what? We all of us should do all in our power to prevent such a catastrophe. There should be no occasion in this “Land of the free and home of the brave” to continue the cry that “this is a white man’s country,” as was sung around the streets Saturday and Sunday nights, for it can easily be shown that neither all the free nor all the brave are white.³⁰

Here the petition seems to refer to ideas about “race war” which were echoing in various minds and arenas. It seems clear that this threat seemed real – and may have been both feared by some and hoped-for by others, on both sides of the color line. The petitioners’ warning that white lawlessness might provoke a degree of black retaliation which would lead to catastrophe functioned also as another rhetorical assertion of black manhood.

The *Age* article states that the delegation was “cordially received” by the Commissioners, who assured them of their intention to control the violence. There is no mention of when exactly this discussion took place, though the letter does allude specifically to Saturday and Sunday nights, and we know that there was a great deal of such activity on Monday. Based on the *Afro-American*’s assertion that by Monday black people had organized themselves in despair of police protection, there are two possible explanations. Perhaps the elite delegations – discreet or uncomplaining as they may have been when face to face with city officials – judged that it was indeed necessary for the city’s black citizens to maintain their own patrols and security systems, and returned from their meetings to encourage defensive action. Or, perhaps more likely, it may have been

³⁰ Ibid.

that black Washington was not waiting for advice, permission, or direction from its leading citizens on this score, and proceeded with arrangements for its protection notwithstanding their engagement with officials.

Aftermath

In the aftermath of the Washington riot there were several types of analysis that appeared in newspapers and other periodicals around the country. Most fell into one of three categories (or a combination of them): explanations for why the riot happened; arguments as to what it meant or showed about specific groups of people and sometimes the situation in the country; or what this and other riots portended. Because the riot in Chicago happened mere days later (starting on the 27th of July), many of the analytic or expository pieces talked about both events together, even though they were very different.

For some writers, the riot was evidence of the intransigence of black criminality; for others it exposed once again the uncivilized and lawless tendency of a particular category of white people. Certain observers saw the riot in Washington as proof that black people could not live outside the South, but others argued that it was the presence of large numbers of recent *white* southern migrants in the city that precipitated mob action. Rioting in the shadow of the Capitol dome portended race war across the nation, according to one school of thought, but others read the defiance of the city's African Americans in the face of the mob as a sign that "the Black worm [had] turned"³¹ and that henceforth black people would refuse to accept the systematic curtailment or outright denial of their rights and privileges as citizens and finally claim their place in society.

³¹ Chicago *Defender* (CD), 8/2/1919.

Opinion pieces ranged from an earnest essay by former President William Howard Taft reprinted in several dailies, to letters to the editors of various periodicals, such as the one Evelyn G. Mitchell sent to the *Nation* (explored in Chapter Four). They included a humorous sentence in the *Atlanta Constitution*, a black soldier's statement of New Negro ideology in the Letters section of the *Washington Bee*, a nostalgic complaint about race relations from the editors of the *New York Times*, and a series of passionate but precisely argued editorials in the *Chicago Defender*. Some of these pieces are either explicitly or logically in conversation with each other, while others seem less directly or consciously linked to the larger discussion. They are all connected however, in their efforts to make sense of what was happening on the streets of the nation's cities, and to offer – whether literally or by implication – solutions and plans for the future.

In terms of analysis and commentary, white papers were not as monolithic in their response to the riot in D.C. as they were in their reporting, though the latter made the editors' attitudes pretty clear. Though black papers offered a greater volume of opinion, white dailies printed a range of assessments, if not a great number. For the most part, only the black papers continued to discuss the Washington riot for more than a week or so, though national journals like the *Nation* and *New Republic* carried on the conversation at least to mid-August.

There were a number of approaches to analysis of the riot. For some observers, the white tendency toward violence was a sign of other, deeper issues. In this view, white violence was a symptom of the larger problem, which lay with black people. On July 25th the *Atlanta Constitution* carried a letter from one James A. Metcalf, under the headline “Northern-Born Writer Gives Interesting Views on the Race Problem.” Metcalf points

out that “racial antagonisms are not peculiar to the south,” and indeed that “just as much (or even more) hostility is manifested toward the negro in the north” wherever black people live in large numbers. He goes on to assert that when racial antagonism does “[flare] into flame in the north,” it is generally more destructive than in the south, and that because D.C. is neither north nor south, but rather a “national conglomerate, [it is]...even more significantly constituted.” Metcalf argues that in the South, racial violence is focused on individuals rather than groups, that it is “inflicted upon negroes for the commission of horrible crimes” and is therefore justified, unlike the mass violence that takes place in northern cities. Both kinds of violence arise from the same cause, but southern whites have the “patience, knowledge and judgment with which this question [of race] may be safely handled.” He positions himself as a northern white man who has come after investigation to understand and appreciate the white southern approach.

According to Metcalf, white northerners, so prejudiced against the South, until now

could not understand how delicate and dangerous a situation is created by the residence of a large negro population, nor how necessary it has been to put in force certain restrictive customs and regulations for the preservation of Anglo-Saxon supremacy—which must be preserved in this country at all costs.

The riots should have changed the minds – opened the eyes, really – of northern whites. He goes on to argue for the importance of Jim Crow practices, of “absolute separation wherever racial contact occurs,” as well as strict residential segregation, which was not yet institutionalized in northern cities to the extent that it would come to be. Indeed, arguments like Metcalf’s, pointing to events such as these riots, were a major part of the

impetus for that process of institutionalization, which was not necessarily inevitable for northern cities in 1919.

Metcalf seems to echo the sentiments of a large number of white Americans when he says, “The safety of white citizenship, the safety of the negro himself, the very safety of our civilization all depend upon a rigorous observance of the color line – and the people in the north are now coming to understand this.” Similar claims can be found in sources as various as the writings of novelists such as Thomas Dixon, congressional speeches by men like Vardaman of Mississippi, and the letters columns of daily papers. Metcalf’s letter appears in a southern paper, but he speaks specifically as a northerner, both for and to a great number of white northerners, even as he reassures white southerners that they are not alone in seeing their traditions and practices as not merely rational and righteous, but crucial. The idea of civilization, past and future, was almost universally vital as a point of both argument and evidence, across racial, social, and political lines. Here it serves as ballast for segregationism, as elsewhere (such as in the writings and speeches of Ida B. Wells) it functioned, contrarily, as an indictment of southern lynching.³²

Metcalf closes with a warning to African Americans which represents, intriguingly, at once the white supremacist position and also a kaleidoscopic inversion of what some blacks were saying to one another at this moment.

As to the future of the black race, that depends very largely – almost entirely – upon the negro himself. If he is willing to strive for and wait for educational and moral development, his position may be made secure and his possibilities of advancement in this country be largely increased. If he tries in any way to force the issue; if he

³² See Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*; Alfreda Duster, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

maintains lax morals and law observance, he only blocks his own racial progress and invites danger and disaster.³³

The first sentence could come from W.E.B. Du Bois himself, calling on his people to address the future of the race and to take their uplift upon themselves. The rest was more in line with the Bookerites, against whom Du Bois and others were arguing that on the contrary, now was indeed the time to force the issue. They pointed to the violence of whites as evidence of lax morality and disregard for the law – a lack of civilization, in fact. Danger and disaster were foretold on all sides, as consequences of either white or black action/inaction. A widespread feeling of urgency, a sense of the convergence of numerous strands and forces from the past (however variously interpreted or understood) upon a single moment with incredibly serious consequences for the future, these ideas ran through almost all the writing that emerged in response to the riot. Du Bois’ assertion about the problem of the twentieth century was reinforced everywhere, though many if not most of those who did the buttressing did so unknowingly.

The *Nation* magazine managed to respond briefly to the Washington riot in its issue of July 26, before the dust had quite settled. The editorial paragraph pointed to the central role of soldiers and sailors, and noted that their aggression was in response to “*reported* attacks of colored men upon white women” rather than repeating the accusation unquestioningly.³⁴ This is significant simply because of the relatively mild qualifier, “reported,” which white dailies avoided. The piece goes on to condemn the “inefficiency and slowness to move” of military and naval authorities, and to say further, “As for the police, if they did not actually connive at the wrongdoing, they showed

³³ Letter, James A. Metcalf, AC, 7/25/1919.

³⁴ The *Nation*, vol. 109, no. 2821, 7/26/1919, p. 97. Italics added.

themselves quite unable to cope with the disorder.” In this near-accusation of the police, the *Nation* went as far or even further even than most black publications in their discussion.

The liberal magazine the *Nation* explicitly linked the rioting in Washington to “the lynching evil,” asking how it will be possible to “make headway...when rioting of this kind is permitted at the seat of the Government?” Official inaction on multiple levels is the focus of this critique. Just as police and military authorities could have suppressed the fighting “the first night had there been the slightest official exhibition of vigor and force,” so, by implication, the country could contain lynching if the will existed in government.

Like other observers, the *Nation* pointed to the larger issues and forces in its discussion of Washington. “One of the natural but alarming features of this riot was the shooting-back of the Negroes.” Unlike other white writers, this one does not see the “shooting-back” as evidence of black criminality or inherent bad nature, but rather as the sign of a growing danger:

[T]he patience of the colored people is reaching the breaking point and...the doctrine of meeting force with force – Mr. Wilson’s ‘force without stint,’ as applied to the Germans – is making headway among the colored, partly because of their bitter disappointment that their services in the war have ameliorated their conditions of life not at all, and partly because of the mistaken teachings of some leaders. This increased race bitterness in America is one of the terrible heritages of the accursed war.³⁵

Like many liberal whites, the *Nation* is uneasy with the “teachings of some [black] leaders,” but still points to the “conditions of life” that black people are living with as a

³⁵ Ibid.

primary problem. The clear implication here is that the country needs to “ameliorate” those conditions or the situation will continue to deteriorate. Much of what is said in this commentary echoes black sentiments in editorials, letters, sermons, and even poetry. The real betrayal felt by so many after black service in the war failed to improve African Americans’ economic or social status at home fed into the idea of patience at a breaking point, a patience that for many was already well-overstretched before the war.

In an August 2 editorial titled “Reaping the Whirlwind,” the *Chicago Defender* also connected the riots to lynching, to the war, and to a deep and longstanding American problem. It called the riots in Washington and Chicago a “disgrace to American civilization,” and depicted the black response to white mobs as evidence of a sea change.

It is not chargeable, as some writers think, to the general unrest now sweeping the world. Nor are we witnessing anything new in these disgraceful exhibitions of lawlessness. America is known the world over as the land of the lyncher and the mobocrat. For years she has been sowing the wind and now she is reaping the whirlwind. The Black worm has turned. A Race that has furnished hundreds of thousands of the best soldiers that the world has ever seen is no longer content to turn the left cheek when smitten upon the right.³⁶

The difference here is that unlike the *Nation*, the *Defender* does not see this outcome as unfortunate or alarming. Nor does it characterize the teachings of radical black leaders as mistaken. For the *Defender*, as for many African Americans across region and class, the fact that the “younger generation of black men are not content to move along the line of least resistance as did their sires” is a natural outcome, and one to be celebrated. It was just a matter of time, and it was a consequence of white actions more than black agitation. Here New Negro thinking connected a natural generational development with the failure

³⁶ “Reaping the Whirlwind,” editorial, CD 8/2/1919.

of the nation to respond righteously to decades of African American agitation; it was thus white intransigence which was to blame for the violence, no matter who actually did what in the fighting.

Indeed, as the *Defender* explained it, the “awakening” of the young black man was specifically the result of “the color madness of the American white man...” Black soldiers’ stories of mistreatment abroad “at the hands of the American military contingent” have “inflamed our people as few things could have done.” This was due, just as the *Nation* put it, to the feeling that “[u]nder the promise of a square deal our boys went cheerfully into the service of the country hoping that the aftermath of the struggle would find our people in an improved social and industrial condition.” The *Defender* (a Chicago paper) acknowledged that the industrial situation for blacks had improved, but said that “socially it has grown decidedly worse.” Of course in Washington there was no industrial condition to begin with, and employment opportunities for blacks had in fact deteriorated. The editorial had opened with an allusion to the history of white violence against blacks; the piece points to the worsening of social conditions which were already very bad.

The *Defender* notes that white mobs in each city had different intentions: “In Washington it was a case of ‘teaching us our place.’ In Chicago it was a case of holding our sphere to metes and bounds that had neither the sanction of law nor sound common sense.” In both cases, the mobs were drawing on the long tradition alluded to in the opening paragraph, and blacks were responding from what the paper called a “changed attitude,” for which “we have much in the way of justification.” The history of lynching

and violence linked all these factors, and the editorial ends with an exhortation: “Honor the race riots.”

That same week’s *Nation* had a follow-up piece, looking at both Washington and Chicago. The editorial attacks “blind editors, like those of *The New York Times*,” for pointing to Bolshevik or pro-German propaganda as the reason for the outbreaks, and for blaming African Americans for the violence. The problem, as the *Nation* sees it, is actually the “denial of [African Americans’] fundamental rights as American citizens.” The magazine “[prophesied] more and more bloodshed until this question is settled right.” Though the implication here might seem to be that the bloodshed will be caused by the black rage arising from the denial of rights, that does not appear to be the writer’s meaning.³⁷ He or she directed the harshest accusations at newspaper editors. “Meanwhile, as long as editors encourage lawlessness as cynically as the editor of the *Washington Post*, there can be no hope of averting mob violence anywhere.” The piece ends with a reprint of the infamous “Mobilization for Tonight” item that appeared in the midst of the *Post*’s front-page riot coverage on July 21.³⁸

As for the editors of white papers, by July 29 they were mostly concerned with events in Chicago, which in terms of death and destruction overshadowed Washington. There were in some discussions allusions to the capital, and generalizations about the violence everywhere. In the *Los Angeles Times* on July 31 an editorial on the Chicago riot minimized the larger significance of such events. “A riot is not a revolt, much less a revolution....Revolts must be engineered and revolution scientifically organized.” The

³⁷ It is useful to remember that eruptions of black rage of the type a contemporary reader might infer that the *Nation* was prophesying here did not occur in the U.S. before the 1930s at the earliest, so it is unlikely that the bloodshed of which the magazine was warning would have originated among black people.

³⁸ *The Nation*, vol. 109, no. 2822, 8/2/1919, 133.

Chicago violence was due to an accident which immediately aroused the “‘bad-man’ instincts...among both the white and black trash.” And then the *Times* makes a move common to the white dailies: “A mob of colored fanatics, acting under the lex talionis of the primitive savage, killed a Caucasian as a vicarious revenge.” Once again, the shifting of blame onto black rioters occurred in news coverage as well as in several editorials, despite evidence to the contrary (including, in Chicago, many photographs).³⁹ This shift was frequently accompanied and reinforced by similar characterizations of black people as either savage or childlike – which was, at the time, essentially the same. So though the *Times* editorial explicitly contradicted the idea that these riots were indicative of a new or growing danger – revolt, revolution, anarchy (as the *Nation* warned), even “race war” – the characterization of such events as arising from the “lower instincts of human nature” indicated the sense of an ever-present threat.

This menace is human nature. The editorial focuses, at least ostensibly, on class, in a social Darwinist sort of way. The “better classes among the negroes, no less than among the whites, are working together for the cause of law and order.” Allusions are made to other examples of the “lower instincts” such as the “bad men of the West in pioneer days, the saloon brawler...the mountain vendetta among the clans of South Carolina, the Belgian atrocities....” In Chicago the problem arose among those of both races “who are nearer to the brute than the angel [and who] reverted to original type under the infection of the mob spirit.” Such instincts are normally repressed by the “operation of civilized society.”⁴⁰ This is an argument from the viewpoint of those who

³⁹ Though undoubtedly there was retaliatory and not just defensive violence on the part of blacks in both cities, in both cases the fighting was instigated and sustained by whites, contrary to the retrospective characterizations of the white papers.

⁴⁰ Cf. Bederman.

saw class differences as corollary to inherent characteristics, an analysis based on years of social darwinism which saturated the language and thought of countless people in this period. Such thinking, in this instance, mostly left color out (except for the one earlier allusion to black “savagery”). Noting that “racial animosities” were and would remain causal in many of the “world troubles of today,” the writer asserts that the real danger of such animosities is that they

afford a chance for the agitator and the naturally lawless to kindle through them a fire that may endanger the safety of the commonwealth....States can legislate away the saloon and the brothel and the gambling den through which the worst side of human nature has been wont to find a vent, but they cannot legislate away the human nature itself that first brought these evils into being. And the degenerates denied one vent will start to seek another. The betterment of human nature itself is the only panacea for the world evils. Till this has been accomplished the nation will still suffer from such sporadic outbreaks as the Chicago race riots.⁴¹

There was nothing remarkable about this view, which critiqued Progressive legislative efforts and arguments and reinforced older ideas about inherent, unchangeable moral character. Du Bois’ “Talented Tenth” concept arose from a similar understanding about inherent abilities based largely on social position. It also left readers to draw their own conclusions about the attributes of specific “racial” or color groups, if they chose. African American thinkers and leaders, in their various approaches to “uplift,” frequently contended with this kind of thinking, in themselves and others. The acceptance, weary or otherwise, of a state of perpetual racial tension was an obvious corollary, and fairly widespread among both whites and blacks, though the understanding of it as due to “human nature” was by no means universal.

⁴¹ “Chicago’s Race Riots,” LAT 7/31/1919.

The Washington *Bee*, which often spoke about blacks and whites in terms of social categories with class implications, in this instance rejected class as a basis for blame.

It is charged that the bad element of the colored people were in the mob. This The Bee denies. The cause of all the colored people was common, and the mob did not respect any colored man or woman, so long as his or her face was black.⁴²

Having unequivocally stated that it was whites who were responsible for the violence, the writer (possibly Calvin Chase, the paper's editor) was careful to make distinctions among the city's whites, not blanketing them all with the accusation.

The Bee extends its gratitude to those white citizens who had the courage and heart to protect the colored citizens to the best of their ability. They know that the riot was not started by the colored people; they know that out of the one hundred thousand colored people in this city, nine-tenths of them are law-abiding, and not even the other tenth will violate the law if proper treatment is accorded them.

Here, while clearly appealing to white Washingtonians, the writer is unflinching in his assertion that culpability for the violence belongs to whites. Earlier in the piece he has outlined the efforts of black delegations to galvanize – and also to warn – the authorities, as well as the determination of black citizens to protect themselves, reinforcing the claim that their actions were righteous. This is the same editorial in which the writer “regrets the death of Detective Wilson” but goes on to state that he had only himself to blame.⁴³

Other editorials in the *Bee* – in both this and other issues – were more equivocal about the unity and lack of class differentiation among the city's African Americans. In

⁴² “They Started It,” editorial, *Bee* 7/26/1919.

⁴³ *Bee* 7/26/1919, discussed in this chapter.

fact, the next editorial on the very same page decries the injustice of whites attacking “colored citizens for acts committed by the jacklegs murderers and cut-throats of the race,” going on to complain, “The white people in this city are not discriminating enough.” By this the writer means the white people who have recently come to the city. “Those who have lived in the city for years know that the respectable class of colored citizens are just as law-abiding as the respectable class of white citizens....” For the *Bee*, criminality and respectability are primary categories, and they cut across color lines. And, as for many black Washingtonians, length of residency in the capital is an extremely reliable marker of worthiness.⁴⁴

The paper’s editorial of August 2 also blamed a certain class of people for the troubles in the city. Titled “The Rights of the Black Man,” the editorial opened with the statement “The rights of the people have been violated by a class of irresponsible people.”⁴⁵ The writer explained that “when the colored men...were attacked, they defended themselves,” and that in doing so they were exercising their constitutional rights. These rights were violated not only by the attackers but also by the police and the city government, in first the failure to protect black people, and then in arresting and convicting them for protecting themselves while “white men who were assaulting colored citizens were not arrested.”

The editorial points to inaccuracy and hypocrisy not just in the distribution of blame and punishment for the riot, but also in the telling of the story.

Colored citizens were told to disarm, while the white mob killed them. It is said that it was cavalry that kept the mob from invading South Washington and the Northwest colored section. It was the well-organized citizens who

⁴⁴ Cf Gatewood; Moore; Jean Toomer, *Cane* (New York: Norton, 1975).

⁴⁵ “The Rights of the Black Man,” editorial, *Bee* 08/02/1919.

were prepared to meet all invaders; it was the determination of the black man to protect his home, his wife and his children; it was the determination of the law-abiding citizens to protect themselves, because the police authorities were powerless to protect them.

This passage does multiple duty: it sets the record straight while praising the city's black citizens, criticizing the police, and not so subtly enjoining African Americans, in Washington and elsewhere, to be ready to act again. The next paragraph castigates the government's hypocrisy in failing to hire black men as police after having sent them off to war with no hesitation:

It is so strange that white women are qualified to serve as policewomen, regardless of their age, but colored men who saved the day upon French soil are not qualified to be appointed on the police force. No; no black man with flat feet was disqualified to serve in the recent war. No black man was too short to be drafted into the army, but when it comes to appointing them on the police force, they are weighed in the balance and found too light, or measured with a tape measure and found too short, or they have flat feet. No doubt many a colored soldier who kept the Germans from invading France had flat feet, but the French generals found them to be the bravest and the most courageous soldiers.

This is also a good illustration of the countless instances, before and after this period, of white women and black men using each other as negative examples in their efforts to gain some aspect of citizenship rights or social justice. In Washington, after six years of Wilsonian restriction of federal job opportunities for blacks and the segregation of numerous offices and other previously shared space in federal buildings, the fact that the government refused to hire black policemen – especially when the city had such a large black population – was a perpetual, insulting irritant for African Americans. The significant rise in the number of white female employees of the rapidly growing federal

government, many of them in the types of clerical jobs that might have gone in the past to educated black men, was one of the reasons for the white influx to the city in these years and must have been a constant source of aggravation – for multiple reasons – to black Washingtonians.⁴⁶

Reinforcing the sense of frustration with the police, a letter in the same issue asks,

Where have the police been for the days [of rioting]...? What has been their attitude except one of silently looking on, without raising a hand to stay the lawlessness of the soldier mob...? Is it possible that right here in the Capital City of the nation a mob is allowed to run riot throughout the city for hours and days, and no visibly sincere and strong effort made to check it.⁴⁷

The writer goes on to detail the various laws broken by white mobs – unlawful assembly, disorderly conduct, and assault – and to compare the police in Washington to those in East St. Louis who “stood idly by” while the mob ran rampant. The writer questions the policemen’s courage:

Did they lose their nerve and become afraid to buck up against it? Did they so openly admit to the people that they are at heart cowards? It most certainly looks that way. They should at all times, and most especially in such times as this, remember that they are the sworn guardians of the people – sworn, and expected, to protect the people at the sacrifice even of their own lives. Therefore, they should have shown the stuff that’s in them and, even single handed, and at whatever the cost, displayed a firm front to the mob and made it to understand that the police of Washington were not the kind to allow a thing of this sort to run wild over them.

This is an outright challenge to the manhood of the city’s police. By implication, too, it echoes the editorial’s demand for black policemen in the city. By reminding them of their

⁴⁶ See Abbott, *Political Terrain*, 93-97; also, Chapter Two of this dissertation.

⁴⁷ “Who Is Responsible?” Letter, *Bee* 8/2/1919.

duty and using language like “the stuff that’s in them” and speaking of showing a “firm front” the writer suggests the police lack fundamental and necessary attributes of manhood. The language alludes to contemporary middle class manliness – courage, honor, calm, self-sacrifice. Here again the riot becomes a vehicle for contention over linked conceptions of race and gender. Not only have the police shown their lack of manhood during the week’s violence, but that very failure has forced black men to demonstrate the extent of their own.

The writer goes on to point out further consequences of police inadequacy.

The colored people know now that the seeds of race hatred are deeply implanted here in Washington and that it is very unsafe for any one of them to go about without some means of protection, lest at the very time they least expect they will be set upon by some mob or gang on mischief bent, and either seriously hurt or killed. It is to our interest to seek some protection for ourselves. We have just got to do it.

This is not simply another example of how the riot reinforced for African Americans the unavoidable necessity of self defense. Like others on various sides of the story, this writer points to the riot as final proof of the ways in which racial dynamics in the city have been negatively transformed. The implication in this passage is that this is a new state of affairs, that those seeds, however deep, were implanted relatively recently, that the lesson is a new one.

The writer closes by outlining further evidence that the police failure to stop the mob was one of will rather than ability. Had the rioters had been black rather than white “the entire mob of them would have been rounded up in no time and no stone left unturned to get them.” He or she goes on to explain how the same legal charges that were

not used against white rioters would most certainly have been used against blacks in the same position. Moving on to a critique of the original spark for the riot, the correspondent suggests that the original offenses against white women were probably exaggerated, that the women were probably simply “grabbed or looked at.”

There are so many of those women of anti-Negro temperaments in the city that it is almost dangerous, so to speak, for a colored man to even look at them, lest they set up the cry that the man made some kind of a criminal move directed at them. And then the dailies ring with reports of the crimes. It is well for our people to take with a grain of salt all reports they hear of this character, since there are in the city so many of those folks from beyond the Mason and Dixon line who are ever ready to discredit the race, and really are leaving no stone unturned to spread the seeds of race hatred and prejudice wherever they may be so lucky as to plant their polluting presences. In other words, there is a well-organized propaganda afloat to offset the great fight the Negroes are putting up for a place upon the map, and, of course, it is engineered and planned by the Southern hordes that are now wending their evil way throughout our land.

This belief as to what really happened in those “assaults” was surely shared by blacks in the city and around the country. Once again this writer alludes to changes in the city due to the increased presence of southern whites. This skepticism – often downright disbelief – at white women’s accusations against black men was widespread amongst African Americans. The mistrust went hand in glove with the hatred and fear of white southern “propaganda” stated here. African Americans knew that whites around the country were receptive to what they saw as white southern poison.

The Los Angeles *Times* on August 7 carried a long analysis, titled “Race Riots in North and South,” by William Garner Burgin, a “Specialist in Economics.” In it the writer claims expertise in “race conditions in the South” as well as “recent race

disturbances,” though he offers no evidence for that expertise. He begins by outlining what happened in East St. Louis in 1917, but doesn’t offer an explanation. He says that investigators could find no satisfactory explanation for the riot, that the “facts merely showed that bad feeling existed.” This bad feeling was ultimately sparked into a slaughter wherein people were killed simply because “their skins were black.” There were no “specific charges...against the negroes, no specific crimes...laid at their door.” The only ascertainable cause was “a general bad feeling on the part of both races, and the method of settling the trouble was general slaughter, without respect to the innocence or guilt of the slaughtered.”⁴⁸

Burgin goes on to say that both Washington and Chicago were similar to East St. Louis, although the scale of violence and destruction in those places was “restricted” compared to 1917. “Whatever the local cause of the trouble the method of coping with it was similar – intimidation by reckless killing and injuring.” He doesn’t mention the fact that in Washington and in Chicago African Americans were organized and ready for trouble precisely – and explicitly – because of what had happened in East St. Louis, though to be fair he probably did not know this. He does not appear to have been a reader of black periodicals, notwithstanding his claims to expertise on “race conditions.”

Burgin essentially offers an apologia for lynching in his article, under cover of explicating the riots. Referring to the black victims of the Washington and Chicago riots, he says,

Many of the victims were innocent of specific crimes or of any violation of the rights of others. This, however, is not offered in extenuation of the actual guiltiness of those implicated. Indeed, all who are acquainted with the negroes in northern cities have ample evidence of their too-frequent

⁴⁸ W. G. Burgin, “Race Riots in North and South,” LAT 8/7/1919.

insolence and lawlessness, but an innocent and law-abiding negro should be as secure in the pursuit of his well-being and happiness as any other citizen. There is no warrant for the slightest invasion of his rights.

There are several implications here. The first is that the riots in Washington and Chicago – and perhaps East St. Louis too – broke out because of crimes committed by African Americans. The mobs, in Burgin’s view, were out to punish wrongdoing. There was “actual guiltiness” in the picture, it was just that the mobs “knew neither caution nor justice.” Burgin says that “many” of the victims of the mob were innocent – which seems to imply that others were not. Further implied is that when someone is *not* innocent or law-abiding, there is in fact “warrant for the...invasion of his rights.” This is not, of course, a view supported in the United States Constitution.

Echoing the segregationist Metcalf, the “Northern-born writer,” in his letter to the *Atlanta Constitution*,⁴⁹ Burgin argues that lynching and its attendant practices in the South keep race relations good. In the South,

the races hold each other in high esteem and realize their mutual interdependence. There is, for the most part, a feeling of fellow-helpfulness and amicability. The trouble, when trouble occurs, is always local and isolated—the result of specific violations of the law or of the rights of the group. The cause is specific, the guilt usually definitely ascertainable, and only the guilty are punished.

The last claim especially is not borne out by any evidence, and even at the time was frequently disputed.⁵⁰ But this characterization of race relations in the South appeared frequently in white media. The *Atlanta Constitution* carried a piece on July 30 outlining various ways in which blacks and whites cooperated in the South (“the traditional and

⁴⁹ Discussed earlier in this chapter.

⁵⁰ See, for instance, Litwack, “Hellhounds” and elsewhere, Brundage, Williamson, Dorr.

natural home of the negro”), and asserting that in the face of racial trouble in the North, the South needed to lead.⁵¹ Northerners needed to learn how to be surgical, even ethical in their racial violence, so that the races might safely coexist.

Burgin then tells a couple of stories, to substantiate his argument. In the first, a black labor agitator is whipped and run out of a certain county in Mississippi where he had been inciting “rebellion.” In the second we hear the familiar rape story again, in its classic form.

A beautiful white girl was assaulted by a burly negro and forcibly detained all night underneath a great oak tree. After an all-night’s battle with her antagonist she appeared the next morning at the home of her widowed mother, half-nude, her clothes torn to shreds and her body brutally bruised and mutilated. A posse was organized to hunt the wretch, and feeling ran high among both races. A sagacious leader among the whites, a lawyer of character and foresight, called the negroes together and explained to them that only the guilty brute was wanted and that no violence would result to any other. They were told of the heinousness of the crime that could not go unpunished. The result was that scores of negroes joined the mob and, after a ten days’ search, during which all business in the community was suspended, the criminal was caught and brought summarily to justice. He was swung to a limb of the great oak beneath which he had perpetrated his crime. Before dying he confessed his guilt and admonished his race to forbearance from crime.

This is the generic southern rape parable. It was the script for whites’ rationalizations of the practice of lynching despite the reality that very few actual lynchings grew out of rape accusations. D.W. Griffiths used it for *The Birth of a Nation*; had the little sister not escaped (through suicide) the vile rapist, she would certainly have appeared bruised and battered at her mother’s door. Reverberating through this story are not only the two

⁵¹ “The South and The Negro,” editorial, AC 7/30/1919.

primary figures of the rape scenario, but others as well: the “sagacious” white leader – a lawyer embodying justice, and the “good negroes” who join in the hunt. It is certainly true that at times local African Americans joined southern lynch mobs, either in an effort to protect the larger black community or out of the same vengeful impulse driving the rest of the mob, or both.

This passage shows, yet again, how the mythology that allowed lynching to persist for so long was omnipresent and largely unobjectionable. And like most foundational stories, those who subscribed to it never tired of using it, of hearing it, or of justifying it. Burgin writes, “Here the ends of justice were met, a specific crime was punished with expedition, and a race disturbance prevented from fomenting – all through the instrumentality of a mob!”

Burgin is touting good mobs over bad ones, and he is saying that the South knows how to do a mob, unlike the North. The constant in both scenarios is sexualized black criminality, the variation the “methods” whites use to address it. The race situation is bad in the North because of “a general feeling of hostility and race antagonism” and a “general” failure of mutual respect. This results in “general rioting and slaughter” when the inevitable problem arises due to black crime. In the South, on the other hand, there are neither general problems nor general solutions. On the contrary,

the causes of difficulty are specific, the guilt capable of being definitely fixed, and the means of punishment specific, expeditious and just. The one policy seems to be to kill without consideration of guilt or innocence. The other would curb the mob spirit by directing it, dispense with wholesale killing – but get the right man and punish him. This constitutes the difference between the northern and southern methods of treating the same situation.

Never mind that the means of fixing guilt and allotting punishment being described and praised are illegal, and of course Burgin doesn't mention the torture and mutilation that were so central to most southern lynchings. The mythology overwhelms the facts.

The identical attitude, framed colloquially and intended primarily for laughs, had appeared a week or so earlier in a humor column called "Boy Howdy" in the

Constitution:

Al says if Chicago and Washington and a few more of those cities up that way can't run their own affairs, just let him know and he'll get about five friends from Cobb county and go up.⁵²

This casual allusion to the "methods" white southerners used to keep the racial "peace" in the South – lynching was very big in Georgia – works on more than one level. It is an deliberate dig, aimed at northern white men. At the same time it expresses what a certain number of people (not just in the South) were thinking about how events in D.C. should have been handled. It also demonstrates the assumptions those people held about how black people in any locale would respond. Indeed, it was exactly this lynchers' attitude, or their expectation of it, that black Washingtonians were explicitly countering in their words and actions in D.C. This reality seems outside the understanding of the observers whose opinions are expressed in the item, which, again, is essentially a colloquialized and casual expression of the same ideas that come forth in the Metcalf and Burgin pieces.

The item also carries a not-so-subtle commentary on the capabilities of white men in the northern cities. The idea that "Al" could handle the situation with only five of his cohorts is part of the joke, since in the riot cities hundreds and even thousands of police and military men were not succeeding. Of course there is some slippage here, factual and

⁵² "Boy Howdy!" AC, 7/30/1919.

conceptual. The riot actually arose because some men in Washington were attempting to act just as “Al” was proposing, and failed in their object. “Al” and his fellows would see this as an indication of their inadequacy, a lack of the type, or degree, of white manhood that was so crucial to the white southern self-image. But the item could also be seen to mean that the rioting was what needed the Cobb County treatment, the idea being that things should never have got so far out of hand in the first place, but since they had, it would be a small matter for the Cobb County men to contain it. Again, never mind that thousands had been engaged in the attempt. The joke was that they didn’t know what they were doing, didn’t have what it took. This is an interesting expression of sectional rivalry, and the commentary it offers has less to do with the “race problem” than with an old and ongoing contest of masculinities between northern and southern white men.

The Chicago *Defender* offered an economic explanation for the trouble in its August 9th issue. Though it was specifically focused on events in Chicago, the editorial’s logic had a wider application, and undoubtedly showed what many people thought about general reasons for the violence everywhere, including Washington. The piece opens by dismissing the idea that “these outbursts of the lawless” were due to the immediate incidents that set them off, and draws a comparison with the war: “Does any logical thinking man or woman believe that the recent world war could have been staged on an incident as trivial – speaking in the larger sense – as the killing of one, two or a dozen relatives of a royal family?” The writer says that the various countries had had “axes to grind” and that in general the war was the outgrowth of longstanding problems and suggests that the putative reason was simply an excuse.⁵³

⁵³ “Seeking the Cause,” editorial, CD, 8/9/1919.

The piece goes on to argue that the real reason for the rioting originated with African Americans having become, during the war, “an economic factor in the life of the North.” This change had awakened whites both north and south. The latter were losing “their main prop,” and were “squealing as loud as anybody” as a result, issuing “pleadings and dire threats to the one who enticed the Black man from the land of cane and cotton,” while disingenuously complaining about that same black man. The northern white man, at the same time, had been surprised to find, contrary to stereotypes, that black workers were “bright, energetic, apt, useful and reliable” and had therefore made “a permanent place” for them, and encouraged more migration.

As a result, there was hostility from white workers, which resulted in violence.

There is always friction when two bodies try to occupy the same place at the same time. The close of the war threw thousands out of employment. The American white man, believing himself justly entitled to first pick, questioned the right of a Black man to be holding a job he could fill. . . . The methods employed have been both cunning and dastardly. The bourbon press throughout the country have aided and abetted this insidious propaganda and have constantly played their trump card, “A big, burly black brute attacks a white woman.”

Here the *Defender* outlines various factors at work in the postwar racial tension that led to the Red Summer. Such factors included the postwar industrial and economic contraction with its resultant anxieties, longstanding white supremacist beliefs and behaviors, black rejection of the latter combined with a determination to take hold of the citizenship rights which wartime service had highlighted, and political and media manipulation of the old reliable rape story, with its galvanizing effects on both sides of the color line.

The other significant – and significantly typical – point of the piece, is the centrality of gender in formulating the problem.

The Black man, dating his final papers entitling him to a place in the sun from the day he landed from overseas, where he had been offering his life for the honor of his country, pointed to his record as an American citizen and refused longer to be the tool of any man. This display of manhood brought his enemies to their feet and by fair means or foul it was seemingly agreed to poison the minds of our friends.

The bodies creating friction are male, the contest once again articulated as one between men. Unlike the “Boy Howdy!” reference to competing regional masculinities, however, the *Defender* frames it not as a contest between formulations of manhood, but rather between men. This is, I think, an important distinction. In this case the black text does not explicitly characterize white behavior as unmanly, as the *Defender* and other black publications and writers frequently do elsewhere when treating white racism. Rather the “American white man” (as distinct from, say, the French, who welcomed and treated black soldiers with respect) and the “Black man” here face off, equally men. The white man’s beliefs about his due are not explicitly criticized, simply stated. The black man’s beliefs happen to be different, so the two square off. The characterization of the methods for poisoning minds as “both cunning and dastardly” has an implication of cowardliness perhaps, but it is not particularly feminizing.

Finally, in critiquing the rape myth, the paper itself is making a stand – one it makes frequently. The story had enough potency that to question it even in such general

terms was in most places a dangerous thing for a black person to do.⁵⁴ This analysis is trenchant as well as passionate, like so many of the *Defender*'s pieces, and takes into account the different forces at work, giving weight to material as well as social causes. The reality was that economic and ideological factors worked together to create the violence; neither would have been sufficient alone.

In a piece which synthesized some key black and white analyses, former president William Howard Taft offered an assessment which appeared on the same day in several papers around the nation.⁵⁵ Taft expresses a solid understanding of the reasons for black migration, what we call now the push and pull factors of “southern discrimination in educational facilities and in the administration of justice” and “the prospect of very high wages,” respectively, though he doesn't really address one crucial push – white violence. He echoes the *Defender* in pointing to resulting “congestion” in northern cities as a factor in the violence. He also mentions, with equal sympathy, black disaffection at the U.S. military's treatment of African American soldiers in France as a source of discontent.⁵⁶

Taft goes on to describe two different kinds of “negro leaders,” basically the adherents of Booker T. Washington and those of W.E.B. Du Bois, respectively. He is evenhanded in his description of each group, though he seems to prefer the Bookerites,

who feel as deeply as they can the injustice and heart misery arising from race prejudice, and they would restrain as far as possible by legislation and executive action such injustice. But they believe that the real way to ameliorate conditions is to educate the negro for life by vocational and character training and by thus increasing his value to his

⁵⁴ It is important to remember that though the *Defender* was a Chicago paper, it was distributed nationwide, including clandestinely throughout the South, and the possession of it and other black publications could be and frequently was dangerous for black southerners. See for instance James Grossman, *Land of Hope*.

⁵⁵ W.H. Taft, “Taft Earnestly Discusses Riots,” LAT 8/9/1919.

⁵⁶ While, as I have noted, it was white and not black in-migration that had caused the “congestion” in D.C., the fact of such congestion and the resulting tension having contributed to the eruption of violence is pertinent for the capital.

community and himself to moderate and neutralize such prejudice. They preach and cultivate self-restraint by the negro and self-betterment. They deprecate much the inflaming of the souls of colored men against the white race even when there are at hand well-established facts justifying indignation and a deep sense of wrong.

This group he contrasts with the Du Bois followers whose teachings they “deprecate,” because of their inflammatory effect. The Du Boisians are “educated men who, with no restraint, have poured out their agony of soul and sense of outrage in addresses and editorials and aroused their fellow-negroes as they never have been roused before.” He is not unsympathetic to this group, but deplores their lack of restraint, and points to the dangers it raises.⁵⁷

Taft is unhesitating in placing blame for what happened in Chicago, and by implication Washington and other riot cities.

The evidence seems to show, as is usually the case, that in Chicago the whites were the aggressors and displayed man’s inhumanity to man.... Soon, however, both sides were guilty of lawless assaults and murder. But of course the negroes suffered the more. They always do.⁵⁸

In spite of this assessment, Taft calls for exactly the patience that so many black people just at this moment have clearly decided to abandon. In his open statement that whites are to blame for the violence, and his analysis of why, Taft takes essentially the same position as the very black leaders whose actions (and calls to action) he deplores. He says that it’s understandable that black leaders and non-leaders alike – especially soldiers – want to take “direct action,” but he believes such action will only lead to greater bloodshed:

⁵⁷ See Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, in reference to the implications of such a lack of restraint.

⁵⁸ Taft, LAT, 8/9/1919.

The educated extremists among the negro leaders must certainly see that, however great the injustice done to their race due to blind prejudice, 'direct action' is the worst possible remedy. The more white victims the greater the colored victims will be, and in the end the feeling out of which this evil has come will be increased and the slow and steady improvement in the agricultural and industrial status of the negro shown by statistics will be obstructed. Such leaders should use every argument to quiet their followers and to condemn further lawlessness as an offset to white outrage.⁵⁹

One of the striking things about this position is the unquestioning acceptance of white rage and violence. There is no talk here of consequences for white rioters, or of any program for preventing such outbreaks. However clear-eyed Taft and his ilk were about the forces at work, their only remedy for them was black patience.

There were a variety of white viewpoints on the violence, even among those who were more sympathetic to African Americans, or who came under the category of "progressive," which contained people with a wide range of racial attitudes, including the president himself, at the white supremacist end of the spectrum. Also included in this group was Dr. Evelyn Mitchell, whose letter to the *Nation* appeared August Ninth. Mitchell does not counsel patience to African Americans. She sees the riots as resulting from the failure of the country to do right by its citizens. The black men she met were "not savages, not red-handed murderers," as they had been painted in the press, but "citizens, hunted and terrified." The "one young hothead" in the group she met was overruled; these men were on watch, not on the rampage. On that night, as she talked with these men on the street,

⁵⁹ One cannot help but notice the premonitory resonance of liberal white leaders sympathetically counseling blacks to abandon the idea of "direct action," a concept which would become so important in the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties.

I remembered that my country stands abroad for liberty, justice and the rights of men, though she has them not at home. How blind we are, we Anglo-Saxons, who talk of Freedom and have not yet freed our souls.

A white man once said to me: "You talk like a Negro. You seem at times to identify yourself with them. Have you lost your race consciousness?" I replied: "I hope I think enough like them to show you how they feel. I hope I always lose race consciousness when it stands in the way of my consciousness of common humanity."⁶⁰

Mitchell sees the responsibility as lying not only with black people, to be patient and well-behaved, but rather with "all of us who are standing along the color line" to make change. She doesn't say what the change ought to be, just that whites who recognize that things are wrong must work to make them right.

A few days later the *New Republic* carried a long piece by Herbert J. Seligmann titled "Race War?" in which the publicity secretary of the NAACP castigates the Washington press and city officials for their roles in the violence. Calling the riots "symptoms of the condition of potential race war now existing in the United States," and like others drawing a connection to economics and politics, Seligmann asserts further that the riots

are expressions of animosity which is deeply involved in political and economic issues: As long as the emotions that cling to race antipathy can be fanned to turbulence by rumor, by the press, by persons with ulterior motives, so long will bloody clashes between white men and Negroes threaten the peace of American cities.⁶¹

His condemnation of the *Washington Post* for its "direct invitation to men in the United States service" in the form of the "Mobilization for Tonight" item is matched by his scorn

⁶⁰ E.G.M., "The Washington Riots," *Nation*, 8/9/19, 173.

⁶¹ Herbert Seligmann, "Race War?" *The New Republic*, vol. 20, no. 249, 8/13/19, 48.

for the city's police. "On those first nights the police gave the impression both to Negroes and to white men that they would be the allies of the white men." He goes on to note the predominance of black arrests, and the fact that the aggressors had been white.

One central thrust of the publicity secretary's essay is, not surprisingly, a critique of the press. Having offered police department statistics in response to "the clamor about Washington's 'crime wave' and its use to foment hatred against Negroes," Seligmann discusses the consequences of what he calls the "'crime wave' propaganda against Negroes in the press:" black Washingtonians were afraid of "another East St. Louis massacre." Indeed, he notes that "the words were on the lips of many of their assailants." In other words, the fears of black Washingtonians were fed by explicit threats. This is the reason that African Americans in Washington armed themselves, according to Seligmann. Furthermore, "it was not merely hysterical fear of white mobs that caused Negroes to arm; it was distrust of the government." After permitting the press propaganda which provoked the rioting, and then tolerating attacks "upon unoffending Negroes within view of the White House," and even though

everyone knew there would be riots,...it took three nights of brutality and bloodshed to convince the administration that troops were needed. Negroes armed themselves in Washington because, as a respected member of their race put it in Commissioner Brownlow's office, 'The Negro is beginning to realize that the price of being a man in this country is a willingness to die in defense of his manhood.' In this sense, the race riots of Washington, as in Chicago, probably, are symptomatic of the changing temper of Negroes as well as of white men toward race relations.

Given these circumstances, what was "astonishing" to this observer was that there were not more people shot.

Seligmann declares that the talk amongst whites in Washington about assaults on women and crime waves was really just cover for “a determination to put the Negro back where he was before the war.” According to white workers, African Americans were being paid too well and were “no longer as servile as the southern white man wished.” His investigations “show that economic motives stimulate the emotions which lead to race riots.” What is at stake in this moment is “the economic and social status which will be accorded the Negro as a citizen.” For Seligmann as for innumerable other Americans, it is clear that this is a moment of great possibility and great danger.

The war has meant a vital change in the position of the Negro and in his own feeling about his position. In the Southern states he contributed almost as many men as did the whites. He bought Liberty Bonds, subscribed to Red Cross and other funds, and played his part in the crisis voluntarily and involuntarily as did the white man. Now he feels the opportunity for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness which is accorded him as in some sense a supreme test of this country's professions. If the white man tries to ‘show the nigger his place’ by flogging and lynching him, the Negro, when the government does not defend him, will purchase arms to defend himself.

Seligmann, like so many of the black commentators, uses the riots to point to the rights of African Americans as citizens, to contemporary black ideas about how to claim those rights, and to the widespread turn toward an ethos of self defense in the face of violence as a kind of ultimate expression of that claim. The multiple questions his essay's title provokes – do the riots indicate or portend race war? Will Americans allow the conditions which will lead to race war to persist? – combine with its obvious warning to press whites to try to understand how African Americans assessed the situation, in the interests of averting such a war.

Epilogue

Later that month the *Bee* reminded readers that white men started the riot, and scorns the talk of Bolshevist or IWW influence on the city's African Americans. The editorial asserts that blacks won't start anything, but warns, "they mean to protect themselves when they are unjustly attacked, and the sooner their oppressors realize that fact the better it will be for them." The piece also refutes the idea that it was "the lowest element of blacks" that fought the mob, and goes on to argue that military men had made a habit of insulting blacks on the streets of the city "ever since the war." Black Washingtonians who fought the mob were being called "the lower element" simply because they "had the temerity to defend themselves." It was whites who were the aggressors, and who brought "disgrace" on the city.⁶²

Coverage and discussion of the D.C. riot did not appear in the black socialist monthly *The Messenger* until September. There were a number of editorials dealing with Red Summer events, including one that urged money and lawyers for the legal defense of those arrested, another calling for racially mixed juries in their cases, and a critique titled "Negro Leaders Compromise As Usual." An article later in the issue paints the Washington riot in exceedingly purple prose. Titled "When Negroes Shot a Lynching Bee into Perdition," Washingtonian W.E. Hawkins' story starts by describing the "glaring headlines...inflaming racial strife" which "afforded an excuse to the large Southern element here to 'clean up Washington.'" Hawkins charges that white editors

realized the effect this propaganda would have upon the Southern reactionaries who had carried on a long and intense program of hate to get rid of the Negroes they found here holding down good jobs, wearing better clothes than the average Southerner can afford to wear, and who did not have to jump around generally and make abject kow-tows whenever a white face appeared. So these

⁶² "Not to Blame," editorial, *Bee* 8/23/1919, 4.

twentieth century crusaders of democracy set out to put the Washington Negroes into their ‘places.’ Sunday night, July 20th, United States soldiers and sailors, bent upon lynching colored people and assisted by a part of the hoodlum element launched their cleaning-up “campaign”, [sic] and the Negroes who had a presentiment of what was coming silently agreed to assist the cleaning.⁶³

Hawkins was in D.C. during the riot, and was clearly deeply affected by the experience.

He describes the fighting, and the spirit among the city’s African Americans in sensational terms:

His hot blood rushing through his veins, the grim shadow of death looming lurid before him, and the thrill of the glory of battle when fighting for his life, liberty and home stiffening his sinews as steel, he lost his sense of fear and consequence and plunged into the fray with a realization that the God of his salvation was his brick bat and his bullet, his razor and his gun.

Though his writing is extravagant to say the least, Hawkins’ account echoes others which celebrated the “retaliatory spirit” of many who fought in the streets. It is difficult to believe in the face of other accounts that many people were worked up to quite this degree of madness, but Hawkins’ article seems intended as a literary rather than strictly factual account – an allegory, almost. His piece is useful in showing among other things the distinct connection that Washingtonians made between the white riot and lynching, and he certainly reflects the widespread sense of this being a new phase in black politics.

[As] an indication of their state of mind, they openly declare the war here in Washington the greatest event since the Civil War. The Negro has demonstrated right in the sight of the White House and Congress, which refuse to protect him or reward his loyalty that he is afraid neither to kill nor to die for so sacred a thing as liberty and home. Here in the nation’s capital he has thrown down the gauntlet to his country. The gaping wounds of would-be lynchers in the city morgue and hospitals speak an eloquent

⁶³ W.E. Hawkins, “When Negroes Shot a Lynching Bee into Perdition,” *Messenger*, September 1919, 28.

warning that the time of timidity is gone; the day of cringing is over; the hour of compromise is passed; and the high noon of ACTION has come. He says to the lynchers that henceforth it will be eye for eye, tooth for tooth, death for death and damnation for damnation.⁶⁴

In these last paragraphs, Hawkins sounds like others who trumpeted New Negro exhortations to race pride, political and physical self defense, and an unhesitating claim to the rights and privileges of citizenship and humanity.

In the same issue, taking a very different tack, *Messenger* editors – presumably A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen – opened a long analysis of the Red Summer by saying “Race riots are miniature wars.” They offer a seven-page look (including cartoons) at the political and economic history of black people, race relations and racial troubles in the U.S., from a socialist perspective. The economic conditions of the South – the crop-lien system, tenant farming, debt-peonage, produce particular fruits: “prejudice, jim-crowism, segregation and lynching.” Lynching bees prevent black protest, race prejudice prevents class unity among blacks and poor whites – “because race prejudice exists and is artfully cultivated to keep them apart.” Capital exploits race prejudice, the “red embers [of which] are always smouldering in America,” for its own ends. “The race riot was the most effective instrument at hand” for capitalists looking to prevent an imminent “combination of black and white workers.” Washington and Chicago were ideal sites, Washington because the eyes of the country and the world were on it, and rioting there “would inflame the feeling between colored and white persons in all other sections of the country.”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ “The Cause of and Remedy for Race Riots,” editorial, *Messenger*, Sept. 1919, 14-20.

Randolph and Owen discuss the activities of southern propagandists in every part of the country, the function of segregated schooling, the church, screen and stage, and the press in fostering the race prejudice which led to riots. They articulate a succinct version of white southern racial ideology, and argue that this ideology is the “fuse,” an occasion but not the cause, for lynching and racial strife. The real cause, the “magazine,” is the capitalist system. “Most anything in the South may be the occasion of lynching.” They go on to lay out political causes for the riots: because African Americans are disfranchised, police do not feel obligated to protect them, since they are not instrumental in mayoral elections, and in most cities the police are answerable to the mayor and his party. They note that as soon as the rioting in Washington began, Democratic senators introduced jim-crow and anti-intermarriage bills. They argue further that race riots are “symptoms of social diseases,” such as segregation, which “prohibits harmony between the races,” in part because “the prohibition of an act [such as intermarriage] creates the desire to perform that act.” They go on to assert that wartime culture has also been causal.

For years

the religion of violence had been taught to both white and black people of America. War has engendered the spirit of violence. The transition from shooting a white German is not very far from shooting a white American. Besides, Negroes hate American whites, but they almost uniformly report that the Germans were among the fairest and the best people they have ever met. They like the Germans as much as the French. Everybody overseas was better to the Negro soldier than the white American. Hence the Negro returned with vengeance and hatred for the white American in his breast.⁶⁶

This hatred combined with dissatisfaction with “his reward” for wartime service and the discovery on his return that conditions were worse to create the determination to fight at

⁶⁶ Ibid., 19-20.

home “in the interest of himself.” The latter is one of the places where Randolph and Owen’s analysis connects with those held by less radical thinkers, though most of them would probably hesitate to state so baldly and unequivocally that blacks hated American whites, at least in a public forum. But ultimately, however they may have differed on the deeper details and specifics, these two young socialists joined with more moderate and even conservative black commentators in seeing black behavior in the riots as arising from a new disposition, one created by the combination of longstanding difficult economic, political, and social factors with the experiences – both good and bad – of wartime service.

Black publications like the *Bee* and the *Defender* continued through the autumn months to offer analysis and argument as to the causes of interracial violence in the cities. A *Defender* editorial on September 20 addressed a central thread of the violence, one that had been explored minimally if at all, though certainly alluded to – the role of the rape story in the violence, its fiction and hypocrisy and the excuse it provided for white violence. In “Attacks On White Women” the *Defender* began by pointing out how extraordinary and outrageous it seemed to American citizens that the streets of the nation’s capital had seen such violence. Washington was the seat of national government, of legislation, of the Supreme Court. “Yet we have witnessed here some of the most disgraceful scenes ever enacted in any part of the country.” Only one thing could create or, in the minds of some, justify such an occurrence – “the same old excuse – ‘attacks on white women.’”⁶⁷

The piece offers a critical outline of the usual sequence of events in such cases:

⁶⁷ “Attacks On White Women,” editorial, CD 9/20/1919.

If some Negro miscreant snatches the purse of a white woman, or some member of our group jostles some white woman upon the street, the cry is immediately raised that an attack has been made on a white woman. No effort is made to bring out the true facts, but the public is left to believe another sort of crime has been committed. The word "attack" is deliberately confused wherever Colored and white are concerned. If the press of this country were honest in their statements concerning such matters race rioting would be robbed of its chief inspiration.

In general, according to the writer, most black mob victims are innocent, unconnected to the alleged offense and simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. This is because the mobs are not actually interested in justice. There is a failing in American education, in both schools and homes.

In America the ordinary hoodlum needs little provocation to lawlessness. He has no respect for the law because he has not been taught to respect the law. Neither in the public schools or in the family circle has he learned the lesson of respect for the rights of others. Given any sort of a plausible excuse this piece of human savagery is liable to break loose at any time.

This echoes Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, and others who contributed to the black critique of white U.S. civilization. Just as people like James Metcalf, the "Northern-Born Writer" whose letter we examined above assumed and projected an idea of inferior education and home training among blacks, so African Americans used violence and other kinds of mistreatment of African Americans as a case in point for questioning the same among whites. The language and assumptions of a popularized social darwinism are common in such instances.

The *Defender* writer continues with an appraisal of how "yellow journalism" inspires "wanton and uncalled for" mob attacks:

Glaring headlines telling of alleged wrong doing of some unfortunate Negro appear in the press from time to time and are given a prominence absolutely unwarranted by the real facts in the case. It will be a rare case if they do not work into the case some reference to a white woman. This is strictly an American disease and is not featured by the press of any other country. The idea originated in the South, where swaggering, bourbon soaked cavaliers set themselves up as the guardians of the virtue of women of the white race while preying upon the virtue of the women of the darker races. It is now national in its scope and the white newspaper man who can write a story about anything from a mere schoolboy scrap to the burning of a town without showing some signs of the national dementia is a rare bird.⁶⁸

Like Herbert Seligmann, the *Washington Bee*, and a number of others, the *Defender* points to the responsibility of the white press in helping to foment violence. But this piece extends the critique, accusing the press of manufacturing references to white women in cases where a black man is involved. Furthermore, the charge that the origins of this practice actually lay in white men's predation on black women in the South is not only radical but dangerous. At the same time, it was an expression of what a large number of African Americans believed, in many cases based on their own experience. Ida B. Wells made essentially the same connection in the 1890s and she was chased out of Memphis for it.⁶⁹

In naming this "strictly American disease," this "national dementia," the *Defender* places white racial violence based on false accusations of sexual crime, *accusations specifically made in order to enable and to mask actual crimes committed by the accusers*, at the center of U.S. culture and society. Again, a radical and risky analysis,

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ida B. Wells, *On Lynchings* (Salem NH: Ayer, 1991), 6-12; Bederman, *Manliness*, 53-54.

one which was common enough among African Americans but which ran specifically counter to dominant U.S. mythology. The piece goes still further:

If the men of our group were to make reprisals upon the white people for the wrongs done the women of our race, America would see a red day. During the period of slavery the lecherous white master consorted with the slave women of his plantation and filled the South with his tawny offspring. The white sons of this master class are today passing laws to segregate their yellow kinsmen, but, if all reports are true, the separatist measures are only intended for daylight.

This editorial expresses one dominant black perspective on white behavior and tradition.

Reversing white stereotypes about African American lecherousness, duplicity, and criminality, the *Defender's* editorialist points to the hypocrisy of those stereotypes, and of the allegations that historically accompanied them. Arguing that the presence of “3,000,000 mulattoes in this country” proves that it was southern white men who actually sought “social contact” with blacks, rather than the reverse, the writer further asserts that this

desire for social contact with our people is not confined to the South alone. If there is any doubt upon this subject let the seeker for first-hand information visit any thickly settled Colored section of any of our large communities. There he will see scores of white men in the meeting places and haunts of our people and we are not blind to the motives that bring them among us.

In these opening days of the Jazz Age, the presence of white men in black clubs and bars was no anomaly, though it may not have been as common in D.C. as it would become in Harlem.

In an assertion of civilized black manliness, the writer points to the restraint of black men in not seeking “reprisals upon the white people” for their depredations, at the same time implying that such restraint is not to be relied upon forever. The piece’s explicit linking of white men’s exploitation of black women to their claims of being protectors of white women against black men, the naming of where the real danger, licentiousness, and lack of control lay, and the implicit threat that forbearance might be coming to an end make it a consummate expression of the “new spirit” among African Americans.

However specific individuals or groups may have defined the “new spirit,” or the “New Negro,” the idea that such a phenomenon had come into play was widespread, if not universal. Forbearance in speech was clearly already at an end, and the black defiance of and retaliation against white mobs in Washington, Chicago, and elsewhere might be seen as a sign that physical submission was also over, at least amongst those who lived in cities. The longstanding and central fact of racial violence in the lives of black and white Americans had brought the nation to a crisis point and its consequences were everywhere, in thought, language, and action, on both sides of the color line.

CONCLUSION

“Reaping The Whirlwind”¹

The Washington riot gave me the thrill that comes once in a lifetime....At last our men had stood like men, struck back, were no longer dumb, driven cattle. When I could no longer read for my streaming tears, I stood up, alone in my room, held both hands high over my head and exclaimed aloud: “Oh, I thank God, thank God!” When I remember anything after this, I was prone on my bed, beating the pillow with both fists, laughing and crying, whimpering like a whipped child, for sheer gladness and madness. The pent-up humiliation, grief and horror of a lifetime – half a century – was being stripped from me.²

It was not true that the riots of 1919 were the first instance of African Americans fighting back against white mobs, but the perception that this was the case dominated the black response. James Weldon Johnson characterized the riots as a new kind of black resistance, as did ministers in their pulpits and individuals writing letters like the one above to black publications around the country. The half-century this letter’s female writer claims gives the lie to the idea that New Negro militance or the celebration of black resistance were limited either to men or young people. While the historical record shows countless instances of African American families, communities, and individuals resisting attacks or attempts at intimidation by whites through the decades before 1919, it is undeniable that at the time many people saw the Red Summer as a transformative moment in black politics and race relations, when African Americans finally took up arms to fight back against white attackers. Even though this was not historically accurate, and though many people must have known as much, to large numbers of them it felt true.

¹ “Reaping the Whirlwind,” editorial, CD 8/2/1919.

² Quoted in Palmer, *Passageways*, v. 2, 125.

White observers too, whatever they may have thought of it, agreed that the war had inspired a new spirit among blacks. Major Cutler of the MID warned his superiors of the danger:

One of the most unfortunate results of the riots in Washington and in Chicago is the fact that so many of the negroes are convinced that they won out against the whites in the riots, that they showed their superiority over white rioters and over the police, that even the troops were unable to do much against them. This attitude on their part, it is believed, may be productive of some very serious race clashes in the near future.³

Though he investigated – and analyzed – on behalf of the federal government, Cutler’s assessment also reflected the disposition of local authorities toward the growing black urban population. The fear of black self-assertion which inspired and fed post-Reconstruction white violence in the rural South followed African Americans into the cities. I would suggest that interpretations like Cutler’s of black attitudes and propensities – and of their implications – prompted the formulation of official policies and practices that continue to shape the American racial landscape, most sensationally in the recurrent episodes of police brutality that continue to punctuate urban history in the United States.

Though it may seem dubious to claim that World War I was a watershed for African Americans, many of them saw the war, with all its bitterness, as a turning point for the black population. The Washington riot fed into the idea that the war had created – or at least accelerated the development of – a new imperative for many African American citizens. Du Bois expressed this idea in the famous refrain, “We return fighting,” which

³ J.E. Cutler, “The Negro Situation,” Memo for Director of Military Intelligence, 8/15/1919, Glasser files, 10218-364, RG 60, National Archives.

counterbalanced his “Close Ranks” editorial of 1918.⁴ It was not that the idea of civic entitlement or political demand was *new* among African Americans; there had always been a strong current of demand for civil rights, especially in D.C. Furthermore, the transition out of Booker T. Washington-style accommodationism was all but complete for a substantial number if not a majority of African Americans before the U.S. entered the war.

The black migration out of the South was but one obvious manifestation of this shift. Even the powerful and growing appeal of the race pride/race first philosophy of Marcus Garvey, himself originally an admirer of Washington, was evidence of a vastly diminished black willingness to patiently wait until whites recognized their humanity and worthiness. Perhaps it was simply that the war experience provided a particularly potent object lesson – and a fertile rhetorical field – for proponents of black equality. Ever-watchful government agents like Cutler were cognizant of the new spirit among African Americans, and connected it to political activism:

The long continued propaganda, as, for example, that carried on by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, urging the colored people to insist upon equality with white people and to resort with force, if necessary, in order to establish their rights, is now bearing abundant fruit. Beyond a doubt, there is a new negro to be reckoned with in our political and social life.⁵

Again, analyses like Cutler’s of a phenomenon that encouraged and motivated black Americans would feed official suspicion and action against black activists through the following decades. The fledgling FBI was already focused on African American activist

⁴ Du Bois, “We Return Fighting,” *Crisis*, September 1919.

⁵ J.E. Cutler, “The Negro Situation,” Memo, 8/15/1919, Glasser files, 10218-364, RG 60, National Archives.

organizations and ideologies, and a policy of surveillance and disruption would remain central to its mission throughout the following decades.⁶

The United States entered World War I at a moment of growing black frustration, just as a generation of young people came of age who were more removed from the culture of slavery and the disappointments and terrors of Redemption. Colin Palmer calls them the “Generation of 1917”: they were “more urbanized, literate, and politicized than their parents and grandparents” and consequently more demanding of their rights. “They wanted to claim a better life for themselves.”⁷ This characterization certainly matches the rhetoric and helps to explain the behavior of people in D.C. and other cities, and of many southern migrants, but it’s important to remember that these young people were not spontaneously generated. They were raised and educated by people who inculcated in them many of the values and expectations that they expressed with such vigor. The New Negro grew out of the old in countless ways, and like most young people, may not have been fully aware of this reality – at least not until later.

The importance of Washington, D.C. as a center of black politics and culture was only one of the reasons that the riot there was a kind of beacon to African Americans around the country. Though blacks had frequently resisted white violence, their defiance had rarely been successful; in some cases it had served to provoke the whites to even greater brutality, which was one reason so many chose not to resist. But in Washington it seems clear that the organization and determination of black citizens was a deterrent to the mob rather than an incitement. In the aftermath, black commentators emphasized the

⁶ Kornweibel, *Seeing Red: Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Kenneth O’Reilly, *Racial Matters: The FBI’s Secret File on Black America, 1960-1972* (New York: Free Press, 1989).

⁷ Palmer v. 2, 123.

organization and determination of the men of Washington to protect their homes and families. Over and over in telling the story they spoke of the failures of the city's police to contain the fighting, though they generally did not accuse the police of complicity with the mob as in East St. Louis. Instead they cited a lack of will and inadequate forces.⁸ In this narrative, the inability of the police to protect the mobs' targets only highlighted the success of the latter in deterring or fighting off the mobs themselves. In the eyes of many black writers and leaders, and individuals too, the Washington riot was a triumph of black manhood.

The importance of this victory lay in a tradition of African American political thought and activism going back to the early nineteenth century, which linked manhood with the demand for citizenship rights. In this view citizenship was a natural corollary to manhood, and black men's successful performance of gender ideals demonstrated their worthiness of political enfranchisement. African American women's conformity to classic middle class ideals of femininity was equally crucial to the attainment of civil rights. In many contemporary formulations gender differentiation was a clear measure of civilization and intellectual capacity. Arguments against black civil or social equality frequently characterized African American women as hyper-masculine, nearly indistinguishable from men.⁹

A further iteration of the malignant function of racialized gender ideas lay in the elision of black women as victims of racial violence. Scholars have pointed out that historical and historiographic emphasis on the lynching of black men has had the effect of

⁸ In Chicago, on the other hand, some white policemen abetted and even participated in attacks on black people.

⁹ This argument often served as part of the justification for slavery in some quarters, as it depicted African Americans as animalistic in the hierarchical schemes by which 19th century scientists classified humanity.

de-emphasizing – nearly to the point of erasure – the systematic victimization of black women as an element of white supremacist violence. Although the most common representation of this violence is the black male lynching victim, the fact is that many black women were also lynched. Furthermore, and more significantly, the hard reality is that the rape of African American women was a pillar of white violence for centuries prior to the onset of the lynching epidemic. The story of Carrie Johnson speaks to this submerged history as clearly as the masculinist rhetoric that called on black men to defend their families, and in the aftermath celebrated them for having done so. Black women's active self defense during the riot is almost invisible in the record, but one suspects that it was neither unknown, nor unacknowledged. Nor must it have been unexpected by their families and communities.

In the end though, it was black manhood that carried the rhetorical day. From the moment of its publication in July 1919, Claude McKay's poem "If We Must Die" has been universally deployed to represent the Red Summer. In the voice of a man speaking to other men, his brothers, McKay calls, "If we must die, O let us nobly die" and assures his kinsmen that if they do so, "then even the monsters we defy/ Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!" Of course, many black people *would* die, as so many had already done, in battles to claim space and personhood in the new American city. They would not, generally, be honored by those monsters, who were still white men, and who increasingly populated police forces rather than mobs. But that is another story entirely.

It is not within the purview of the present work to address what came of the prospect of a new age of black empowerment that Du Bois, Major Cutler of the MID, and so many people across region, class, and political orientation heralded in the latter

months of 1919. A vast and growing historiography explores and explicates what happened next, and what followed that. To begin the catalogue of the hopes and disappointments of the rest of the century would be to risk never ending, and that cannot be.

I have argued that this riot represents a moment of transformation in the development of black politics and consequently of race relations in the U.S. Because of the unique history of Washington the city's black citizens were able to mobilize politically to defend themselves and to make meaning out of the mob violence in the city in ways that were not possible in other instances, especially in the preceding decades. I am arguing too that this riot shows – both because it happened and also through what people made of it – how important racial violence was to American society and identity, to the making of the modern city, to race relations. Further, the history and continuing threat of violence were manifest in gender ideologies on both sides of the color line; political and social power were articulated via racialized gender identities of which that history and threat of violence was a constitutive factor.

Red Summer violence arose out of the history of racial control as expressed through lynching. Black people as well as white were drawing from that history in both their behavior and their analysis of the reasons for the violence and the proper response once it was underway. Historically, African Americans did not often fight off white mobs, and therefore the success of black Washingtonians in protecting themselves and their property was significant not just to them but to African Americans around the country, and to whites as well, both sympathetic and hostile, though the significance was interpreted differently both within and across these groups.

It mattered that the eyes of the nation were on Washington, because this response was unprecedented not so much in its occurrence as in its success. This is why the memory of East St. Louis is so important to this narrative, and Chicago too. In other places and at other times (not least Tulsa in 1921) black people lacked the resources – of various kinds – to successfully fight off the mob that they had in Washington in July of 1919. Maybe this was even true specifically *because* the eyes of the world were so focused on the capital: because the city represents the nation, but also and importantly because of the resources African Americans had in D.C., their history, their economic, social, and numerical power.

I find myself, oddly, compelled to end not with the passionate, laser insight of W.E.B. Du Bois, as I had always intended, but rather with two other analysts of the American experience. First, Walter Lippman, from his introduction to Sandburg's book on the Chicago riot:

It is not possible, I think, to examine this record without concluding that the race problem as we know it is really a by-product of our planless, disordered, bedraggled, drifting democracy. Until we have learned to house everybody, employ everybody at decent wages in a self-respecting status, guarantee his civil liberties, and bring education and play to him, the bulk of our talk about "the race problem" will remain a sinister mythology. In a dirty civilization the relation between black men and white will be a dirty one. In a clean civilization the two races can conduct their business together cleanly, and not until then.¹⁰

Lippman believed that the two races should remain separate, but that they should have equal rights and opportunities, that they should go forward on parallel tracks, side by side, never meeting. The tradition of white Progressivism and late-century liberalism

¹⁰ Walter Lippman, "Introductory Note," in Sandburg, *The Chicago Race Riots*, xix.

would retain elements of Lippman's insight and his faith in a "clean," rational solution to the "dirty" problem of race throughout the twentieth century, without ever finding success. American efforts at integration, driven by a similar rationalist ethos, have not been much more successful than the long-discredited "separate but equal" doctrine in which Lippman trusted.

The Red Summer has been largely lost to memory, if not to history. Despite widespread certainty that the riots presaged a huge change, despite the possibility that they did, in fact signal a moment of transformation, they have been subsumed. African American history is rife with stories that have been swallowed, nearly lost, pushed to the side or overshadowed, dismissed from the larger narrative of U.S. history. I would like to suggest that the disappearance of the D.C. riot is a particularly useful example of this phenomenon. This event, so meaningful to so many people in so many different ways as a signal of possibility and danger, hope and also fear, disappeared almost completely from the national consciousness, and appears to have dwindled down in local awareness too, after not very long. The storms and raptures of the new decade all but washed it away.

This riot's virtual disappearance from memory within a short time is neither surprising nor unique. Events such as this one punctuate the nation's history, and periodically one or another floats up to the surface. A journalist somewhere stumbles upon a terrible event like the obliteration in 1921 of the thriving black suburb of Tulsa and there is a flurry of news stories, perhaps a book or two, the widespread expression of hope that by facing this ugly history we may overcome it, and then a return to business as

usual. What would it look like to truly take on this history? Would doing so change our perceptions – of selves, of others? Would it enable real transformation?

There are no memorials in the monument-ridden capital city to the Red Summer, no markers of black resistance or lives lost. But just as they arose out of distinct, foundational historical realities, this riot and similar events persist in shaping what has followed, whether or not we see it, or can admit it. James Baldwin's testimony sixty-five years after the Red Summer reinforces this assertion:

The conundrum of color is the inheritance of every American, be he/she legally or actually Black or White. It is a fearful inheritance, for which untold multitudes, long ago, sold their birthright. Multitudes are doing so, until today. This horror has so welded past and present that it is virtually impossible and certainly meaningless to speak of it as occurring, as it were, in time. It can be, and it has been, suicidal to attempt to speak of this to a multitude, which, assuming it knows that time exists, believes that time can be outwitted.¹¹

Our collective blindness to this history supports the nation's continuing racial inequality, fear, and resentment, with all their attendant consequences. Perhaps if we can learn to truly face historical moments like this one, not simply to admit to them but to examine their continuing influence on all our lives, and to act based on what we learn, we may finally become able to dismantle their legacy and begin to live, "as it were, in time."

¹¹ James Baldwin, "Preface to the 1984 Edition," *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), xii.

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