

Sentinels for New South Industry: Booker T. Washington, Industrial Accommodation and Black Workers in the Jim Crow South*

BRIAN KELLY

In 1912, “race war” broke out in Cuba. The island’s hard-won independence, formally attained in 1902, had failed to deliver the “nation for all” that nationalist visionary Jose Marti and his largely black and mulatto following had aspired to. Instead white Cuban elites attempted to emulate the standards of “civilization” laid down by their North American counterparts, laying the foundations for a society in which blacks and mulattoes remained second-class citizens. Afro-Cuban war veterans, outraged at the government’s failure to reward their sacrifices over many years, organized the *Partido Independiente de Color*, demanded their “rightful share” to the fruits of independence, and in 1912 led an armed revolt that was brutally suppressed by the US-backed government, at a cost of more than 3000 lives.¹

As their descendants had for generations before them, American Southerners on both sides of the color line paid careful attention to the events unfolding in the Caribbean, refracting their significance through the prism of their own distinctive approach to the “race problem.” Startled at what seemed to them a costly failure in racial control, white Southerners congratulated themselves on having eliminated the volatility intrinsic in bi-racial coexistence by anchoring racial difference in an elaborate system of formal segregation: its absence in Cuba seemed a perilous defect.

A more remarkable evaluation of the Cuban events came from Booker T. Washington,² who emerged as the dominant figure in African American politics nearly two

* The author wishes to acknowledge the generous support of the British Academy, the Academic Council at Queen’s University Belfast, and the John Hope Franklin Collection of African and African-American Documentation at Duke University for funding the research that made this article possible. He would also like to thank Jorge Giavonnetti for bibliographic advice on the 1912 revolt in Cuba and Eric Arnesen, Tera W. Hunter and Peter Rachleff for critical comments on an earlier draft of this article. None of them are responsible for the interpretation advanced above.

¹ The most authoritative account of the events appears in Aline Helg, “Our Rightful Share”: *The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886–1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995). See also Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), Louis A. Perez, Jr., “Politics, Peasants, and People of Color: The 1912 ‘Race War’ in Cuba Reconsidered,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 66, 3 (1986), 509–539.

² In 1898 Washington entered an arrangement with the US military allowing matriculation of Cuban and Puerto Rican students at Tuskegee Institute. Some among them led a series of strikes and mini-rebellions at Tuskegee over complaints about food and prohibitions against their playing baseball on Sundays. “Largely because of the Latin students,” notes Harlan, “the school had to construct a guardhouse. The Cubans refused to eat ... and struck against their work. When a teacher and a student tried to put [one of the leaders] in jail, his compatriots jumped them, but they succeeded in making the arrest. Guns were flourished before order was restored.” Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856–1901* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 283.

decades earlier when, during the 1895 Atlanta Exposition, he issued a public call for reconciliation based on black accommodation to the Southern status quo. In an article addressed to the northern, white readership of *The Continent* entitled “Negro Leaders Have Kept Racial Peace,” Washington expounded on why African Americans, with “much more reason for a resort to physical violence” than their Cuban counterparts, had held back from a resort to “rebellion or insurrection.” “The answer is simple,” he explained. After emancipation, “wise … self-sacrificing” whites had undertaken the “training of negro leaders (‘teachers and ministers … doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, farmers, businessmen or politicians’) who were placed … as sentinels in every negro community in the South” and who “kept a steady hand on the masses of the colored people.” Exalted by a relieved white America as the authentic embodiment of diminished black aspirations, Washington had often pointed out to whites the utility of conservative leadership in sustaining racial détente, but seldom had he offered such an unguarded appraisal of its role in containing black insurgency.³

Historians have been reluctant to accept Washington’s word that one essential function of post-Reconstruction race leadership had been to reconcile the black “masses” to their place in the segregated South. One prominent recent study has credited him instead with “[l]aying the groundwork for the militant confrontation of the Civil Rights Movement,” while a second describes Washington as a “radical and effective [advocate] of African-American power.”⁴ Others underestimate the tensions that developed between race leaders and black workers, stressing the contribution of elite-led “uplift” to institution-building in the black community, locating within such work an important sphere of agency, and asserting its ostensible cross-class appeal. But this mildly exuberant tone is difficult to square with the meager gains secured for ordinary black Southerners in the Age of Washington, and obscures the regressive thrust at the heart of the accommodationist project.⁵ The considerable advances made over the past generation in reconstructing black Southerners’ experience under Jim Crow, evident in a vibrant and expanding historical literature, are undermined by a continuing reluctance to examine tensions within the black “community.” A historiographical lineage that began, appropriately, with recognition of the need for nuanced scholarship has delivered, over time, a mostly laudatory evaluation that emphasizes accommodationism’s subversive capacity⁶ but prevaricates in delineating its relationship with Southern white elites or its complicity in shoring up the system under which black workers languished.

This article attempts to lay the groundwork for a reevaluation of elite-led racial uplift

³ Booker T. Washington, “Negro Leaders Have Kept Racial Peace,” *The Continent* (Chicago) 43 (October 3, 1912), 1382, in *Booker T. Washington Papers* (hereafter BTW Papers), ed. Harlan, vol. 11 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 33–34.

⁴ Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890–2000* (New York: Penguin, 2001), xiii.

⁵ For general remarks about the strengths and weaknesses of this scholarship as it applies to the turn-of-the-century urban South, see my “Racial Uplift and Racial Solidarity in Early Twentieth-Century Birmingham: A Review of Lynne B. Feldman’s ‘A Sense of Place’,” online at: http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?tx_vx=&list=h-labor&month=0107&week=e (July 2001).

⁶ Virtually all assessments of Washington, including my own, accept the conclusion reached in early studies by Louis Harlan and August Meier that he combined public submission to white supremacy with surreptitious attempts to challenge specific elements of the Southern racial order. Harlan writes that Washington “clandestinely financed and directed a number of court suits challenging the grandfather clause, denial of jury service to blacks, Jim Crow service in transportation, and peonage. Thus, he paradoxically attacked the racial settlement he publicly accepted.” See Harlan, *Washington: Making of a Black Leader*, preface, n.p. See also Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, 110–114.

by excavating the relationship between Washington-style accommodation and white elite designs for the industrializing South. It aims to demonstrate that the “race problem” extant at the New South during the traumatic years of its early industrial development was, to a far greater extent than most historians have acknowledged, rooted in the antagonism between propertied white elites committed to industrial transformation and a mostly propertyless black working class that would provide the fodder for the remaking of the South. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s compelling proposition that Jim Crow can best be understood as “racial capitalism”—“a system that combined *de jure* segregation with hyperexploitation of black and white labor”—suggests that black workers belong at the very center of any meaningful understanding of the period, and not relegated to the margins or written off as an inert mass carried along under the protective wing of black petit bourgeois leadership, well-intentioned or otherwise.⁷

A wide range of sources confirm that black labor was the lever with which New South modernizers hoped to lift their region out of the lethargy to which plantation slavery had condemned it. Industrial promoters agreed that “cheap, docile, black labor”⁸ was the key to the region’s future, an axiom they articulated frequently and in remarkably explicit terms. Booker T. Washington’s significance—and the function of accommodation more generally—can best be understood in terms of the compatibility of his formula for race progress with elite requirements for a tractable workforce. Historians working from a “race relations” framework continue to gauge the efficacy of Washington’s strategy by drawing up a balance sheet of losses and gains for the race as a whole, and then speculating about whether the “protest” strategies advocated by rivals W. E. B. DuBois or William Monroe Trotter might have delivered more. But like Washington’s admirers, they assume a “unitary racial experience” under Jim Crow which, as Judith Stein has suggested, “denies the historical existence of those black who lost both to Booker T. Washington and the dominant [white] classes in the age of segregation.”⁹

The “new men” brought to power in the South after the overthrow of Reconstruction—industry-oriented individuals like *Atlanta Constitution* editor Henry W. Grady, his co-thinker at the *Manufacturers’ Record* Richard H. Edmonds, lumber baron John Henry Kirby and his counterparts in coal and iron, Alabama’s Henry DeBardeleben and Tennessee’s A. S. C. Colyar—exhibited a contradictory, almost schizophrenic, attitude toward the mass of black laborers in their midst. None of them entertained the notion that freed men or women should enjoy the same rights of citizenship as their white neighbors, and few showed any restraint in cataloguing the Negro’s deficiencies, invariably ascribed to innate racial characteristics. While they refrained, on most occasions, from publicly indulging in the crass style of race-baiting associated with the demagogues of the age, New South industrial elites were hardly paragons of racial egalitarianism. At best they exhibited a paternalistic attitude toward the “inferior” race; confronted with a challenge to their ascendancy they proved themselves as adept at playing the race card as the most extreme white “radicals.”

Simultaneously, however, the modernizers recognized black labor as a vital asset in

⁷ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Mobilizing Memory: Broadening Our View of the Civil Rights Movement,” *The Chronicle Review*, July 27, 2001, online at: <http://www.chronicle.com>.

⁸ George Gordon Crawford, Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad executive, cited in George R. Leighton, *Five Cities: the Story of Their Youth and Old Age* (New York: Ayer, 1998), 129.

⁹ Judith Stein, “Black and White Burdens: Review of Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., ‘Black Americans and the White Man’s Burden, 1898–1903,’” *Reviews in American History*, March 1976, 89.

the New South's industrial renovation. Frustrated at times by what they regarded as the "undependability" of black labor, industrialists were nevertheless unanimous in acknowledging that it constituted one of the cornerstones in constructing a prosperous future. "The greatest resource of the South," a typical editorial in the *Manufacturer's Record* asserted in 1893, "is the enormous supply of cheap colored labor." Opportunity "for the masses of negroes" lay in transforming the region's untapped natural endowment into profits. "Its vast mineral wealth is to be uncovered, millions of feet of timber are to be cut, thousands of miles of railroad are to be constructed[, and] great drainage projects are to be carried through ... with all the incubuses placed upon them, the negroes are a vital factor in Southern advancement," they insisted. "Today the South could not do without them for a week."¹⁰

While it may be true, as some have argued, that black workers provided the most fertile ground in which Southern trade unionism could sink its roots in the 1950s,¹¹ the opposite seems to have been the case in the period before World War I. If we take white employers at their word, the most attractive qualities manifested by black labor in the post-Reconstruction period were its vulnerability and lack of a disposition for collective organization. "As a laborer [the black worker] has no equal for patient industry and mule-like endurance," a South Carolinian wrote in 1890, articulating a nearly universal theme. The ex-slave, "by the blessings of freedom, is now willing to toil from year's end to year's end for about one-half of the [former costs] which [we] once paid for the fruits of his labor. This same man is the iron mine laborer, the furnaceman and the mill man of the future that will yet aid his white friends of the South to take the lead in the cheapest production on the continent."¹²

With all its limitations, the Populist revolt provided the last large-scale opportunity for black plebeian self-assertion before World War I.¹³ While the years after its decline in 1896 would be punctuated by intermittent, localized confrontation between organized black workers and their employers,¹⁴ the possibility that these could feed into a wider challenge to the status quo—as they had during the upheaval accompanying Reconstruction—had been dramatically weakened. Populism's defeat and the wave of reaction accompanying it hastened the disintegration of the collectivist impulse that had infused black politics since emancipation, and disfranchisement eviscerated the political

¹⁰ "The Negro as a Mill Hand," *Manufacturer's Record*, September 22, 1893.

¹¹ See Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 214–277. Honey's argument is sharply challenged by Alan Draper in *Conflict of Interests: Organized Labor and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1968* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1994), 10–13.

¹² "Southern Bessemer Ores," *Manufacturers' Record*, October 25, 1890.

¹³ In recent years a rich historical literature has documented the centrality of labor militancy as a key component of post-Reconstruction black activism. See, for example, Berlin *et al.*, *Freedom: a Documentary History of Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), particularly Series 1, vols. 2 and 3, *The Wartime Genesis of Free Labor*. Historians disagree on whether the Populists ever actually challenged white supremacy. More important here, however, is the question of whether Populism was *perceived* by the Southern ruling class as a threat to the racial order. About this issue, it would seem there can be little debate.

¹⁴ For useful surveys of black labor activism in the Jim Crow South, see Paul B. Worthman and James R. Green, "Black Workers in the News South, 1865–1915," in *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience*, ed. Huggins, vol. 2 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971); Eric Arnesen, "Following the Color Line of Labor: Black Workers and the Labor Movement before 1930," *Radical History Review* 55 (1993), 53–87; Rick Halpern, "Organized Labor, Black Workers, and the Twentieth-Century South: The Emerging Revision," in *Race and Class in the American South since 1890*, ed. Stokes and Halpern (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 43–76; Daniel Letwin, "Labor Relations in the Industrializing South," in *A Companion to the American South*, ed. John Boles (London: Blackwell, 2001), 424–443.

terrain upon which that impulse could be expressed. Among the mass of black agricultural workers and the growing numbers abandoning the Cotton Belt for the mines, mills, and timber camps of the New South, the deteriorating racial climate taxed whatever reserves of optimism and cohesion remained. From the perspective of Southern employers, Jim Crow's utility in anchoring the vulnerability of black workers and sustaining the low-wage regime they deemed essential to regional development was among its most attractive features.

In the new era commencing with the elites' triumph over the agrarian challenge in the mid-1890s, leading proponents of Southern industrialization labored systematically to revive the paternalist rapport their agrarian forebears had formerly enjoyed with the black masses. Black workers anxious to leave behind the stifling despotism of plantation life represented to men of the New South a ready-made army of cheap menial laborers, who could not only be profitably deployed in the extractive industries emerging throughout the region but, it was assumed, might potentially operate as a labor reserve indispensable for restraining the inflated expectations of working-class whites. By 1910 some 1.2 million African Americans labored on the nation's railroads and in its factories and mines, an overwhelming majority of them in the South.

The revival of this elite-led racial paternalism shaped, in profound ways, the new orientation of black politics articulated by Washington in his speech before the 1895 Atlanta Exposition. The "Age of Washington" commenced with the demise of Populism, and coincided precisely with the period described by W. Rayford Logan as the "nadir" in African American history. The pact announced by Washington in 1895 has been evaluated almost exclusively in racial terms—as a declaration of the surrender of black political aspirations and the postponement of the struggle for civil equality. But an exclusive focus on its racial import obscures the degree to which "compromise" reflected a growing, class-based rapprochement between elites on both sides of the color line. Washington's intervention might be more meaningfully understood as the inauguration of a partnership between New South white elites and their counterparts in the increasingly conservative black middle class, now convinced of the futility of political agitation and increasingly enamored with the Gospel of Wealth. The real losers in this pact were not black Southerners generally, but more specifically the black working classes.

In articulating the basis for elite collaboration, Washington gave voice to a tendency that had been coalescing among black conservatives since the overthrow of Reconstruction and which had been tempered in the confrontation with Populism. African Americans who, following emancipation, had linked their fortunes to those of their ex-masters in the Democratic Party had evolved from being an exotic, inconsequential and widely detested fringe on the margins of the black community to one which, aided by the patronage of white elites, grew in numbers and self-confidence in the 1890s.¹⁵

¹⁵ Judith Stein, "'Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others': The Political Economy of Racism in the United States," *Science and Society* 38 (1974–75), 434–441; Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, 38–39. On black Democrats, Else Barkley Brown writes (123–124) that "[b]lack men and women ... throughout the South, initiated sanctions against those black men perceived as violating the collective good by supporting Conservative forces. Black Democrats were subjected to the severest exclusion: disciplined within or quite often expelled from their churches and mutual benefit societies; denied board and lodging with black families." Later, as "formal political gains ... began to recede and economic promise became less certain ... political struggles over relationships between the working-class and the newly emergent middle-class, between men and women, between literate and non-literate, increasingly became issues" in Richmond (130). See Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," *Public Culture* 7 (1994), 107–146. See also Peter Kolchin, *First Freedom: The Responses of Alabama's Blacks to Emancipation and Reconstruction*

Within the Republican Party, the radicalized freedmen and women who had constituted the phalanx of the Union Leagues during Reconstruction had experienced defeat after defeat—initially at the hands of the Klan and white paramilitaries, but later by their own “lily-white” Republican leadership. Many who remained prominent in the party at the end of the 1880s had long since jettisoned the plebeian manifest at the high tide of Radical Reconstruction; their numbers consisted increasingly of place-seekers and rising elites, who “found themselves tied inextricably to the lot of the black masses even when they no longer articulated their interests.”¹⁶

Paradoxically, the formalization of the color line punished black workers even as it promoted the ascendancy of a black entrepreneurial elite within the confines of the ghetto,¹⁷ widening this social gulf even further. The Populist challenge had divided the black middle class, rekindling for a minority the vision they had entertained before Redemption, but its main effect was to inject a sense of urgency into the attempts by white planters and rising industrial elites to solidify their alliance with black conservatives. And this emerging milieu did not leave them wanting.

It was their evolving collaboration with emerging race leaders that permitted New South propagandist Henry Grady to state with confidence, amidst the early rumblings of the agrarian revolt in 1887, that he and his counterparts across the region had “no fear” of black “domination.” “Already we are attaching to us the best element of [the black] race,” he told an audience at Texas, “and as we proceed our alliance will broaden.”¹⁸ Washington and others did not merely resign themselves, reluctantly, to weathering hard times in partnership with white elites; they enthusiastically shared the logic underpinning Grady’s program. Louis Harlan, who can hardly be accused of projecting a hypercritical image of Washington, described him candidly as “a black counterpart of Grady,” insisting that “it was not merely that Washington was circumspect, that the mask he turned to Southern whites was a mirror. Washington not only seemed to agree with whites who were racially moderate and economically conservative; he actually *did* agree with them” (emphasis in original).¹⁹ No surprise then that *Atlanta*

Footnote 15 Continued

(Westport: Greenwood, 1972), 132, and the documents in Herbert Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro in the United States*, vol. 1 (New York: Citadel, 1951), 565–568, 576–579 and Edmund L. Drago, *Hurrah for Hampton!: Black Red Shirts in South Carolina During Reconstruction* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), 57–94. August Meier writes that while initially “those who [stood] with the Democrats tended to be the old servant class or successful, conservative businessmen,” the composition of Democratic supporters changed as Southern blacks dejected by the desertion of their cause by Republicans began to tactically divide their votes. See Meier, “The Negro and the Democratic Party, 1875–1915,” *Phylon* 17 (1956), 2, 173–191 (quote from 174).

¹⁶ Stein, “‘Of Mr. Booker T. Washington’,” 432.

¹⁷ August Meier, “Negro Class Structure in the Age of Booker T. Washington,” *Phylon* 23 (1962), 258. Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) writes that the “Negro elite—professional men, lawyers, or small, financially ambitious merchants … were quite eager to promote the concept of ‘separate but equal’. Thus in only ten years after the Emancipation, there was already a great reaction setting in. All the legal chicanery and physical suppression the South used to put the Negro back in his place was, in effect, aided and abetted by a great many so-called Negro leaders.” Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Harper Trade, 1963), 53.

¹⁸ Henry W. Grady, *The New South and Other Addresses* (New York: Maynard, Merrill & Co., 1904), 53. Oliver Cromwell Cox writes that “[t]he Southern oligarchy proposed to use the best Negroes, the most gifted of them, to forestall the political aspirations of their own people.” Cox, “Leadership Among Negroes in the United States,” in *Studies in Leadership: Leadership and Democratic Action*, ed. Alvin W. Gouldner (New York: Russell and Russell, 1950), 238.

¹⁹ Harlan (ed.), *BTW Papers*, vol. 2, 321; Harlan, *Washington: Making of a Black Leader*, 166.

Constitution editor Clark Howell, after noting that there had been some “initial opposition” among white directors of the 1895 Exposition to permitting a Negro to share the podium, insisted that Washington’s speech amounted to a “full vindication” of Grady’s views, and that “there was not a line in the address which would have been changed even by the most sensitive of those who thought the invitation to be imprudent.”²⁰

In the context of this developing affinity between elites on either side of the color line it was unremarkable that, in his appeal to white Southern employers to “cast down your buckets where you are,” Washington stressed the tractability of black labor in terms aimed at alleviating concerns being expressed in the industrial press. “Cast your buckets among those people who have, *without strikes and labor wars*, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, [built] your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the earth” (emphasis added). Confronted several years later with a growing clamor for immigrant labor to remove solve the problem of black “inefficiency,” he stressed the same qualities: “We have never disturbed the country by riots, strikes, or lockouts,” he reminded whites. “Ours has been a peaceful, faithful service.” Or again, in an article which appeared in the *Southern States Farm Magazine* in 1898: “The negro is not given to strikes and lockouts. He believes in letting each individual be free to work where and for whom he pleases,” a declaration that complimented perfectly the open-shop policy upheld by Southern industry. “He has the physical strength to endure hard labor, and he is not ashamed or afraid to work.”²¹

Washington’s affirmation of black working-class passivity should be understood not merely as a rhetorical mask with which he sought to cultivate the support of influential whites. Nor was his an idiosyncratic position out of step with the thinking of black elites elsewhere in the South. While some in that milieu resented the obsequiousness that pervaded so much of Washington’s public posturing, in general they were united in acquiescing to white elite prerogatives, and the subordination of labor to capital formed an essential element of that outlook in Gilded Age America. The outlook popularized by Washington resonated in the statements of numerous black ministers, educators, and newspaper editors. There remained, to be sure, small corners of community life outside the grip of the accommodationists, but few advocates of racial uplift contemplated a fundamental challenge to the existing social order.

If Populism at its zenith had broached the possibility of a coalition of lower-class blacks and whites, the accommodationists’ prescription for race progress was founded upon the opposite proposition: an alliance with the “better class of white men.” Washington explicitly held up the example of black support for Populism, and Radical Republicanism before it, to support the accommodationist view that freedmen had been given the franchise prematurely.²² In a speech that reconstructed in its entirety the white elite rationale for the color bar and positively welcomed Southern restriction of the ballot by property and educational qualifications, a speaker at the first annual meeting of Washington’s National Negro Business League (NNBL) in Boston (1900) recalled freedmen’s susceptibility to “all sorts of wild doctrines” that had aimed at

²⁰ Harlan (ed.), *BTW Papers*, vol. 4 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 17, n. 1.

²¹ Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: A.L. Burt, 1901), 159; “The Educational and Industrial Emancipation of the Negro: An Address before the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences,” February 22, 1903, in *BTW Papers*, ed. Harlan, vol. 7 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 94; *Southern States Farm Magazine*, January 1898, in Harlan, *BTW Papers*, vol. 4, 375.

²² See, for example, Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 158.

"break[ing] down the political power of his former masters" and elevating former slaves to "places of trust and responsibility."²³

The accommodationist doctrine in fact reproduced all the main elements of the vulgar, white supremacist interpretation of the recent past (an interpretation, it should be noted, that had been pioneered by the nation's leading academic historians): that the "fidelity and love" of black Southerners for their ex-masters had been corrupted by unscrupulous carpetbaggers and scalawags taking advantage of black ignorance (a theme regularly deployed by Grady); that federal intervention under Reconstruction had "artificially forced" racial equality upon the region, upsetting its natural hierarchy; even the notion that slavery had provided blacks with a "school of civilization," the benefits of which had been allowed to slip away during the rupture in paternalist relations. The ideological foundations for a growing convergence between accommodation and an increasingly innocuous racial uplift borrowed heavily from the consensus among white elites that the black "race"—deprived after emancipation of white moral guardianship—was in free fall, deteriorating rapidly and perhaps even on the road to extinction.²⁴

Even where they took exception to the malevolence underlying this new consensus, race leaders committed to the doctrine of uplift acquiesced in the assertion that reform of the black masses was an essential element in, and a precondition for, defusing racial tensions. Having abandoned any possibility of a frontal challenge to white supremacy, race leaders resigned themselves to aiding black workers in adapting to a sharply circumscribed existence within the boundaries set by Jim Crow. One prominent black Alabama educator identified "two distinct problems" facing graduates of Washington's Tuskegee Institute: "the problem of extending education to the masses of our people and *the problem of so adjusting the people to their actual conditions* that the two races [can] live and work together in harmony..." (emphasis added). "We must admit," he continued, "that there are entirely too many [African Americans] who are ignorant and superstitious, too many who are gamblers and drunkards ... Tuskegeans operate under the motto: 'Go ye into all parts of the South and change these conditions'."²⁵

Leavened with an uncritical faith in the ameliorative powers of the market, uplift relieved Southern white elites of their own culpability in black laborers' plight, placing the burden for advance squarely upon the black working class itself. Shaped by the twin imperatives of "Jim Crow terror and New South economic development," Kevin

²³ H. C. Harris of Birmingham quoted in *Proceedings of the National Negro Business League*, Boston (August 23–24, 1900), 219.

²⁴ Washington shared the concern expressed by white elites that the "lesser race," deprived of patrician guidance, was rapidly "deteriorating" and perhaps even on the road to extinction. David W. Blight traces the emergence of white consensus about black degeneration in "popular literature ... minstrelsy, film, and cartoons, and, most tellingly, ... in academic high places. Produced by historians, statisticians in the service of insurance companies, and scientists of all manner, a hereditarian and social Darwinist theory of black capacity fueled racial policies of evasion and repression. By the turn of the century, [popular] Negrophobia was ... buttressed by highly developed, academic notions of blacks as a 'vanishing race,' destined to lose the struggle of natural selection." David W. Blight, "Quarrel Forgotten or Revolution Remembered? Reunion and Race in the Memory of the Civil War, 1875–1913," in *Union and Emancipation: Essays on Politics and Race in the Civil War Era*, ed. Blight and Simpson (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1997), 162–163. See also Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 12–13, 25. Typical of this view was an editorial in the *Manufacturers' Record* which warned that "In considering [the race] problem most of us are prone to forget that the Negro is but forty years removed from slavery; that those forty years have done much to counteract the benefits conferred by slavery upon the Negro in the elemental training which changed him from an indolent savage to a worker ..." *Manufacturers' Record*, May 1, 1902.

²⁵ William J. Edwards, *Twenty-Five Years in the Black Belt* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 109, 110–111.

Gaines has written, black elites adopted a strategy of moral guardianship that “transformed the race’s collective historical struggles against the … planter class into a self-appointed duty to reform the character and manage the behavior of black workers themselves.” As a solution to the problems of black poverty and powerlessness uplifters attempted to instill faith in the bourgeois imperatives of individual thrift, faithful service to one’s employer, sobriety and self-discipline. But, as Leon Litwack has observed, the “rhetoric of uplift proliferated almost in direct proportion to its irrelevance to the working lives of most black Southerners.”²⁶

Some race leaders won to uplift were hopeful that a protracted demonstration of service and submission would gradually clear the way to meaningful reform; others seemed driven by a palpable contempt for the masses that mirrored white hostility. Either way, their embrace of uplift affected powerfully the black middle class’s outlook on the labor question, with consequences that can be gleaned in elite attempts to “reform” black domestic workers at the turn of the century. Evidence of white impatience with the impertinence of black female domestics littered the Southern press intermittently at the close of the 19th century. The protest by one employer in 1883 that the domestics’ penchant for “leaving without any particular reason at all” was making it “dangerous to invite company three days ahead” attests to the exasperation that the “servant problem” gave rise to and the paternalistic demeanor of those on the receiving end of black disaffection.²⁷ In the early years of the new century, a general perception seems to have emerged among employers of domestic workers that the situation had become intolerable, and a corrective campaign ensued, enthusiastically supported by prominent accommodationists.

In introducing *New York Post* editor Oswald Garrison Villard to the Sixth Convention of the NNBL in 1905, Booker T. Washington announced to delegates that the grandson of famed abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison would lecture on a subject that race leaders “have been too timid” in discussing, but one which “vitally concerns the interest of [the] race.” The guest speaker proceeded to dissect the South’s labor problem in terms entirely compatible with Grady’s vision and in language laced with the most denigrating racial stereotypes. Expressing astonishment at the “intense feeling with which the servant problem is discussed” in Southern homes he had visited, Villard identified the “available but unwilling supply of household servants” as a “genuine menace to the welfare of the colored race” and a state of affairs which “gives the white mistresses a feeling of personal injury as one shamefully wronged.”

“The work is there, and the pay is ready,” Villard asserted, “but many colored people simply will not avail themselves of their opportunities. They prefer to live in their dilapidated Negro quarters until driven to work by necessity. And then—so runs the all-too-familiar tale—they come only to be wished away. They are dirty, slovenly, often impudent, habitually lazy and dishonest and unwilling to work steadily.” Citing a recent article by the Dunning school Reconstruction historian Walter L. Fleming on “The Servant Problem in a Black Belt Village,” Villard acknowledged that there were “some good colored washer-women, as there are a few good capable servants,” but held that the majority were “shiftless, work irregularly, and do not always know the difference between mine and thine.” In concluding, he recalled an encounter with a “millionaeir

²⁶ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 20; Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 148.

²⁷ Testimony of Mrs. Ward, November 15, 1883, *Report on Relations Between in Labor and Capital*, vol. 4 (Washington: U.S. Senate Commission on Education and Labor, 1885), 343, cited in Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 59–60. On day-to-day resistance among Atlanta domestics, see Hunter, 57–62.

[sic] southern banker” who had been brought to tears when recounting “the wonderful tact and ability and skill of his old Negro mammy who had … served five generations of his family.” “Is not the colored race recreant to its duty if it fails to produce thousands of mammies like this?” he prodded delegates, attempting to impress upon them the “supreme need of household training for the mass of colored women of this country.”²⁸

No evidence survives of delegates’ reaction to Villard’s scathing speech, but Washington’s laudatory, anticipatory remarks at the outset, along with the fact that the NNBL chose to reprint the talk in its entirety, suggests that while those present may have cringed at its most derogatory elements, they accepted its main premise. Washington and others were on record several years earlier calling for action along the same lines. Extolling the “love and attachment between the races at the South,” the Tuskegeean’s co-thinker and sometime rival William H. Councill wrote in the *Colored American* of the “wonderful chance” for “honorable” domestic work, urging black domestics to make themselves “the choicest jewel of every Southern home.” The first Hampton Negro Conference at Washington’s alma mater in 1897 stressed the importance of domestic training for relaxing racial tensions: “One way to establish better relations with the white people will be to give them better cooks, better laundresses, better chambermaids, better housekeepers,” the gathering’s most influential speaker suggested. Both Hampton and Tuskegee rejected education for women in “belles letters, art and music” in favor of courses that emphasized domestic skills, and one of Washington’s trusted confidantes, Melvin H. Chisum, served in his early years as the “proprietor of a ‘Training School for Colored Servants.’” Washington himself would later assert, in the *Colored Alabamian*, that since “[t]he white child spends a large proportion of its time in the arms of the Negro woman or Negro girl,” black domestics “should be clean … intelligent, and … above all, moral.”²⁹

The cadre of race leaders influenced by Washington accepted without serious objection white employers’ allegations about black workers’ thriftlessness and lack of discipline.³⁰ Like their counterparts elsewhere in the South, Birmingham’s iron and steel bosses grumbled about black workers’ “shiftlessness” and their proclivity for “wandering and moving about.” “Generally speaking,” a reporter for the *Birmingham Age Herald* asserted in 1903, “the colored worker of Alabama is not a success when he is taken from the cotton field and harnessed to the chariot of coal and iron.” A steel executives’ complaint that blacks exhibited a tendency to walk off the job “whenever the notion strikes them” typified the tone of the Southern industrial press generally. “If there is a show in town, or an excursion on the Fourth of July, or a burial, it makes no difference what the excitement may be,” he protested. “[T]hey will just drop their work and go off.”³¹

²⁸ Speech of Oswald Garrison Villard, *Proceedings of the National Negro Business League*, Sixth Annual Convention (August 16–19, 1905), 45–48, 52.

²⁹ Councill in *Colored American*, August 11, 1900, cited in Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, 210; Fanny Jackson Coppin cited in Cynthia Neverdon-Morton’s discussion of the Hampton Negro Conference in *Afro-American Women of the South*, 113. Article on the futility of education in “[a]rt and music for people who lived in rented houses and have no bank account” appears in *Tuskegee Student* 14 (1902), 1–3, cited in Harlan (ed.), *BTW Papers*, vol. 6 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 469. Chisum’s early career is discussed in Harlan, *BTW Papers*, vol. 7, 219, n. 1. Washington’s comments on domestic training appeared in *Colored Alabamian*, January 23, 1909.

³⁰ For an in-depth treatment of tensions between accommodationists and black workers in the Birmingham district, see my “Beyond the ‘Talented Tenth’: Black Elites, Black Workers and the Limits of Accommodation in Industrial Birmingham, 1900–1921,” in *Time Longer than Rope: Civil Rights before the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Adam Green and Charles Payne, Jr. (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming 2003).

³¹ *Birmingham Age Herald*, August 16, 1903; James W. Sloss cited in Daniel L. Letwin, “Race, Class and Industrialization: Black and White Coal Miners in the Birmingham District of Alabama, 1878–1897,” Ph.D. dissertation, New Haven, 1991, 55.

Washington expressed similar consternation: “One of the weak points in connection with our people being employed in [manufacturing],” he wrote, “is that too many of them yield to the temptation to go off on excursions, picnics, etc., when their work demands their time and attention.” In her important North Carolina study, Jeannette Thomas Greenwood notes that the “better class” of blacks “expressly targeted camp meetings, public baptisms, and excursions,” identified by one local editor as “three of the strongest agents in the demoralization and breaking down of our people.” The *Manufacturers’ Record* published in October 1897 a flattering review of a sycophantic “study” by Georgia accommodationist Dr. R. H. Johnson that, in its view, delivered “gratifying relief from the insane optimism which has characterized much of the treatment of the negro question in certain quarters.” Crediting Washington’s leadership with “opening the way to such a study,” the review quoted at length a passage urging Negroes “all over the country” to “organize against laziness, immorality, drunkenness, immoral ministers, teachers, physicians and reformers of all kinds, organize against excursions, hot suppers as now conducted, and … respect the laurels of virtue of all women.”³²

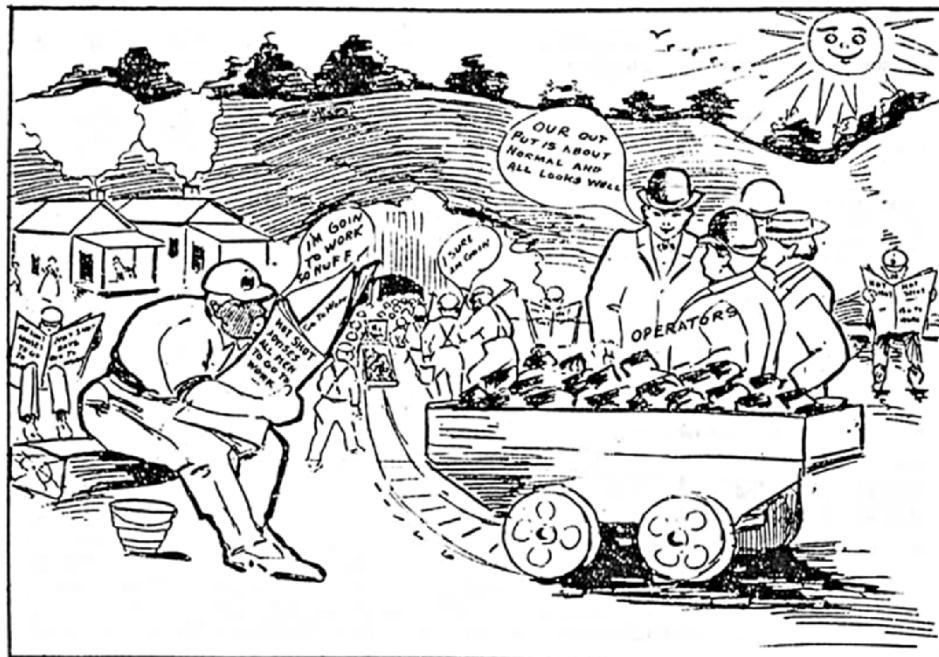
In many areas, Washington’s *National Negro Business League*, described by one historian as “the organizational center of black conservatism,”³³ served as a supplier of unskilled black labor to employers, and here the potential for a clash between uplifers anxious to demonstrate black workers’ employability and workers unimpressed with the wages and conditions on offer was evident. Birmingham *Hot Shots* editor Reverend William T. McGill exhorted black miners during a strike in 1908 to stop their “[constant] grumbling about the white people not paying us for what we do,” insisting on another occasion that “at none of the [steel and iron] plants is the colored man discriminated against in any way or manner.” His more prominent successor, W. H. Councill protégé Oscar Adams, used his weekly *Birmingham Reporter* to harangue black workers on the importance of steady work habits and loyalty to one’s employer. After an unsuccessful attempt to recruit workers for openings at a plant employing black labor exclusively, Adams conveyed his bitterness that after sending “twenty-five or thirty men to the factory … not a third of them remained, not half of them began to work.” Unable to fathom any other explanation why workers might walk away from such a generous “opportunity,” Adams attributed the embarrassing outcome to their failure to “see the need for so much money at the loss of their usual frolic.”³⁴

Sharing the philosophical outlook of white elites, race leaders discouraged by pervasive working-class ambivalence were led to denounce the black poor in terms that matched the invective peddled by hostile whites. They worried openly that the irredeemable element would “drag the race down” and attempted to proscribe elements of working-class life that seemed to breach proper race decorum. Adams used the pages of the *Reporter* to warn his readership regularly against association with the “unworthy Negro,” the “Negro swell,” the “Negro gambler … of the crap game gentry,” and the “dishonest Negro,” all of whom seemed to be “conspiring to pull down what the ‘worthy’ of the race had built up.” In Charlotte, Greenwood argues, race leaders “attempted to distance themselves from the rest of the African American community,

³² BTW to Glenn R. LeRoy, March 31, 1903, in Harlan, *BTW Papers*, vol. 7, 109–110; editor W. C. Smith in the *Charlotte Messenger*, February 24, 1883, cited in Greenwood, *Bittersweet Legacy*, 85.

³³ Fon L. Gordon notes that NNBL supporters “provided local, middle-class opposition to suffrage leagues, the Niagara Movement, and the NAACP.” Gordon, *Caste and Class*, 78.

³⁴ *Birmingham Reporter*, August 9, 1919.



This cut shows about all the miners going to work. The Operators are happy over their victory, it also shows how all the miners read the Hot Shots and what they think of its advice.

FIG. 1. A number of black-run newspapers developed close ties with southern industrialists and urged black workers to steer clear of trade unions. During the Alabama miners' strike of 1908, Birmingham *Hot Shots* editor Reverend William T. McGill admonished black strikers to stop their "constant grumbling about the white people not paying us for what we do." He lauded black strikebreakers (as in the cartoon above) but denounced strikers as "good-for-nothing vagabonds" who had brought "disgrace [upon] the race" (*Hot Shots*, August 26, 1908).

articulating disgust and occasionally revulsion for 'the masses' even as they stressed race pride, solidarity, and uplift." The temperance question, especially, exposed the chasm dividing the city's black workers and elites: defeat of a prohibition ordinance revealed that race leaders "had little political clout in their own community—despite their alliance with powerful whites and their contention that they were the new race leaders." Tera Hunter's rich depiction of dance hall culture in early 20th-century black Atlanta reveals a comparable rift: elites added their influence to white attempts to shut down the halls, arguing that "the better class doesn't want them, and the worst element should not be permitted to have them."³⁵

Their conspicuous targeting of secular black working-class leisure activity, and in

³⁵ Birmingham *Reporter*, December 4, 1920; August 9, 1919; Greenwood, *Bittersweet Legacy*, 85, 96; Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*, 173, and Chapter 8, "Dancing and Carousing the Night Away," 168–186. Hunter concludes the chapter by suggesting that "[m]uch was at stake for the black middle class in this struggle to contain and eradicate vernacular dance. The controversy over dancing occurred as a modern black bourgeoisie asserted its claim to define and direct racial progress. The black elite sought to impose its own values and standards on the masses, to obliterate plebeian cultural expressions that, in its view, prolonged the degradation of the race" (186). Feldman contends, similarly, that "members of the middle class believed it was their duty to perform as role models for the downtrodden and that the crude behavior

particular the unregulated, sexually charged atmosphere of the dance halls, “blind tigers” and “jook joints,” suggests that uplifters were particularly embarrassed by their inability to win the masses to prevailing middle-class standards of sexual morality. In this effort black clergy, female church auxiliaries and women’s sections of the fraternal orders fought a rearguard action against what they perceived as rampant promiscuity, trying to win skeptical black working-class women to a “higher and nobler womanhood”³⁶ that stressed the importance of legal unions—and of chastity before marriage and monogamy within it. But, as Deborah Gray White has argued, the reformers’ designation of chastity as the “litmus test of middle-class respectability … established an orthodoxy bound to drive a wedge between themselves and the masses of black women.”³⁷

The declining authority of mainstream churches among black workers, expanded possibilities for secular leisure activity, and the growing social distance between black elites and newly urbanized African Americans were all likely contributors to this failure. In some parts of the urban South, black elite congregations had by the turn of the century established themselves in buildings physically and socially removed from the black masses,³⁸ and their disdain for the emotional style of worship prevalent in working-class congregations is heavily documented. In the feudal company towns taking form around the extractive industries and home to a large percentage of the industrial working class, believing workers of both races manifested a preference to worship away from the surveillance of company officials and employer-subsidized ministers.³⁹ Often they were attracted to independent preachers or to the Holiness and Pentecostal sects that proliferated in such settings.⁴⁰

Substantial numbers of black workers seem to have exhibited scant enthusiasm for formal worship of any kind. A Birmingham camp physician noted in 1907 that the “churches wield only a limited influence” over the lives of black miners, who “make no pretense toward being religious, even tho [sic] moral,” and maintained that the “lodges seem to draw many that are uninfluenced by the church.” More suggestive was the

Footnote 35 Continued

displayed by members of the lower classes was responsible for the race’s problems, including Jim Crow legislation.” Feldman, *Sense of Place*, 189.

³⁶ *Birmingham Reporter*, August 12, 1916.

³⁷ White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 70.

³⁸ William E. Montgomery argues that in the years following Reconstruction an “expanded [black] aristocracy,” which included the “mulatto-dominated elite [and] blacks from the ranks of teachers, ministers, lawyers, and physicians … formed their own churches” in order, one contemporary observer suggested, “to get as far as possible from the ordinary Negro.” Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865–1900* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1993), 260.

³⁹ Wayne Flynt, “Alabama White Protestantism and Labor, 1900–1914,” *Alabama Review*, October, 1981, 206, 208.

⁴⁰ Montgomery writes that as “the Baptist and Methodist churches became more conservative, with expanding bourgeois values, their services and congregations looked and sounded more like the Presbyterian, Congregational, and Episcopal churches of the black aristocracy” and “began to lose their appeal to poor, uneducated people who looked in growing numbers to the new holiness, pentecostal, and spiritual movements for the religious experiences that would elevate their lives. See Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 345–346. Paul Harvey concurs, arguing that “[r]acial and cultural interchange figured importantly in early Holiness/Pentecostalism. A faith born not in the South, but attracting white and black southern folk disaffected by the embourgeoisement of dominant urban religious institutions, early Pentecostalism functioned much like the early national camp meetings.” Harvey, “Racial Interchange in Early Southern Pentecostalism: Paper Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Historical Association,” November 16–19, 2001, New Orleans, 1.

report of a perplexed Texas sawmill manager who informed superiors that while “we have got a good bunch of people in this [racially mixed] camp … they care nothing about Church work and will not donate anything” to maintaining a minister, even though workers found it “no trouble to make up three or four hundred dollars when one of their co-workers get burnt out, sick or something.” Anxious to promote religious work, the official nevertheless warned management against solving the problem by sending an occasional preacher, since “they will not go to hear him preach unless they just want to have some place to go.”⁴¹

The unwillingness or inability of black workers to voluntarily abide race leaders’ moral injunctions occasionally led uplifters to resort to more authoritarian means. Mississippi’s leading exponent of black self-help and racial accommodation, Isaiah Montgomery, recounted in a 1907 interview the methods by which his all-black colony at Mound Bayou had purged itself of indecency. When the “moral condition” of the community had become an “issue” some years previously, “a committee was appointed from each of the churches to make a house to house canvass [sic] … in order to determine to what extent loose family relations existed.” Forty couples found to be living together “without the formality of a marriage ceremony” were prevailed upon to “marry within a certain length of time or … be prosecuted.” Most married; some left. And in contrast to Charlotte and other Southern towns, where race leaders had tried but failed to win the masses to prohibition, the sale of alcohol was banned by decree in Mound Bayou.⁴²

Uplifters’ attempts to regulate black working-class life extended into the workplace itself. Employers frustrated with their lack of success in anchoring black workers to steady, full-time industrial labor frequently solicited race leaders’ advice, and many responded enthusiastically. Washington spoke on at least two occasions to orchestrated mass meetings at the Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Company, one of the largest employers of black industrial labor in the South. The first of these, in 1909, was hosted by “an efficient colored committee … ably and materially assisted by the white citizens who turned out in large numbers … and completely filled the lower floor of the local theater.” A detailed report of the second such assembly, held three years later, sheds some light on the aim of Washington’s intervention. The meeting originated in talks between R. R. Moton of the Hampton Institute and prominent local race leaders concerned with the “distinct need of having the 2250 colored men and boys co-operate with the general manager” in “getting [them] to work regularly.”⁴³

Prior to Washington’s visit, the *Tuskegee Student* reported, the Company’s frustration with the undependability of its black workers had led to fears that “the introduction of foreigners” was imminent. A recent pay rise seemed to have made matters worse, it was alleged: “idleness and irregularity were increased” as a result. Speaking before a segregated audience that included black laborers and “those who [could] bring unusual influence upon them—mothers, wives, ministers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, and busi-

⁴¹ “The Alabama Mining Camp,” *The Independent*, October 3, 1907, 790–791; J. B. Hodges to W. N. Sangster, January 15, 1923, Box 47:4, “Church-Blox,” *Kirby Lumber Company Collection*, RG D-034, Houston Metropolitan Research Center (hereafter KLCR).

⁴² *World’s Work* 14 (1907), 9125–9134.

⁴³ “An Address by William Taylor Burwell Williams on Washington’s Tour of Virginia,” July 4, 1909, in Harlan (ed.), *BTW Papers*, vol. 10 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 144. Williams was a Hampton graduate and later a member of the faculty at Tuskegee. The 1909 Newport News visit was followed up by a trip to Page, West Virginia, where Washington addressed a meeting of black miners (148). 1912 meeting reported in “An Account of a Speech in Newport News, Virginia,” *Tuskegee Student*, August 1, 1912.

ness men,” Washington reportedly exhorted workers to “stick to their jobs and, instead of recklessly and foolishly spending their good wages, build better homes and churches.” Urging them to “do their full duty and more than they were being paid for, to keep their word,” and to “co-operate heartily with those in authority,” Washington announced the opening of a company-run YMCA and night school, emphasizing that management would “do all that it can to keep its colored workers off the streets and give them an opportunity of becoming more efficient and reliable.”⁴⁴

The specter raised in the events at Newport News of the displacement of black workers with immigrant labor highlights another crucial point of convergence between Southern capital and the accommodationist program. Integral to the outlook propounded by Washington and much of the middle-class race leadership was the conviction that only by proving themselves the most tractable, economical, and uncomplaining source of menial labor could the black masses secure a permanent monopoly over unskilled work in the South. This perspective led them not only to trim their demands for racial justice but, significantly, to oppose the occasional efforts of black workers to assert their rights through trade union or other forms of collective organization.

Disfranchisement, civil inequality, and racial violence were not incidental aspects of the black Southern experience in the years straddling the turn of the century, but their function is best understood when considered in the full, and distinctive, framework of New South labor relations. Although no stratum of the black South was immune from racial animosity during this period, as Nell Painter insists, its effects were felt disproportionately by “poor black men, the foundation of the southern working class.” The “victimization of prosperous black men,” she writes, was “almost incidental to the immobilization of millions of black workers.” Voting restrictions targeted the same class, leaving the privileges of black elites largely unaffected.⁴⁵

The strategy pursued by accommodationists in the face of mounting reaction was predicated upon emphasizing this distinction between themselves and the black masses: they countered Jim Crow in transportation with an argument for physical separation along class lines, insisting that respectable blacks should not have to endure traveling in the same coach as the dregs of the race;⁴⁶ they accepted educational and property qualifications in voting as positive, remedial steps that would allow the intelligent element to lead;⁴⁷ they refrained from straightforward denunciation of the most despicable acts of violence out of fear that speaking out would jeopardize their cherished partnership with the “better class” of whites. Washington’s feeble rebuke to a white audience at the turn of the century that it was “unreasonable for any community to expect that it can permit Negroes to be lynched or burned in the winter, and then have

⁴⁴ “An Account of a Speech in Newport News, Virginia,” *Tuskegee Student*, August 1, 1912.

⁴⁵ Nell Irvin Painter, “Social Equality, Miscegenation, Labor, and Power,” in *The Evolution of Southern Culture*, ed. Numan V. Bartley (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 60.

⁴⁶ Gaines writes that elites “opposed racism by calling attention to class distinctions among African Americans as a sign of evolutionary race progress … The self-help component of uplift increasingly bore the stamp of evolutionary racial theories positing the civilization of elites against the moral degradation of the masses.” Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 20–21. Greenwood reports that Charlotte race leaders opposed Democratic Party legislation calling for segregation on the rails “chiefly on the grounds that it did not take into account class differences among blacks.” They voiced “no objection to being separated from white people if they will place colored ladies and gentlemen in a coach where they can be protected against white and black roughs alike …” Greenwood, *Bittersweet Legacy*, 204–205.

⁴⁷ See Washington to John Elbert McConnell, December 17, 1885, Harlan, *BTW Papers*, vol. 2, 284.

reliable Negro labor to raise cotton in the summer" provides a particularly poignant reminder of the limitations of this approach.⁴⁸

In a region where, as one editorial predicted, "long hours of labor and moderate wages will continue to be the rule for many years to come," black workers' vulnerability offered Southern employers a powerful means with which to maintain stability. Disparaging occasional objections that pervasive "ignoran[ce], thriftless[ness], and inefficien[cy]" ruled out the general employment of black labor in industry, editors at the *Manufacturers' Record* noted that, despite its alleged shortcomings, "the Southern employer ... shrinks ... from having white labor introduced which will call for concessions and demand rights denied the negro." The "presence" of black workers "has prevented the spread of labor organizations in the South," another concluded, leaving the region "comparatively free from ... futile interruption by strikes and other disturbances."⁴⁹

Black elites by and large accepted these generalizations—indeed they celebrated the tractability and conservatism of the black masses and believed that these qualities offered strategic leverage in developing close relations with leading whites. Herein lay the basis for sharp tensions between black workers and race leadership. "Notwithstanding the advice of conservative[s] who propagated Booker T. Washing-

⁴⁸ Washington's speech cited in Basil Mathews, *Booker T. Washington: Educator and Racial Interpreter* (London: SCM Press, 1949), 223. Some measure of white elite reaction to the accommodationists' silence on racial violence can be gleaned in the satisfaction expressed by white observers at annual meetings of Washington's National Negro Business League. Reporting on the NNBL's 1900 Convention in Boston, *Gunter's Magazine* noted that although "[t]he New Orleans riots occurred while the preparations for the conference were being made," the "streets of New York resounded to the cries of negro-hunting mobs just at the time when many of the delegates were leaving their homes to come to Boston," and the "newspapers were filled with accounts of the disturbance at Akron," the proceedings passed without "one single reference to the riots or the conditions which gave rise to them." "These were business men, come to Boston for a definite purpose with which politics had no connection." The Boston press reported similarly that "There was no politics [or] clamoring for rights. There was as little sentimentality as in a meeting of stock jobbers or railroad directors." See Harlan, *BTWPapers*, vol. 6, 76–77. In almost identical terms the *Manufacturers' Record* ("Negroes Who Work," August 27, 1903) remarked on the NNBL's Nashville Convention in 1903 that it was "gratifying to hear so few complaints urged against the white people ... But two babblements were uttered against 'the oppressions' of the white man out of a delegation of 1500 representatives of the industrial negroes from every part of the country. This serves to show that that portion of the negro race which wishes to work had no cause for just complaint. It is the loafer, the idler, the fellow who wants the government to come to his assistance, the improperly educated, who want social equality and advantages that their merits do not justify."

⁴⁹ "Cheap Southern Labor," *Manufacturers' Record*, August 16, 1890; "The South and Labor," *Manufacturers' Record*, August 10, 1905; "The Negro Problem," *Manufacturers' Record*, October 28, 1898. See also "Difficulties of the Labor Problem in Southern Industries," *Manufacturers' Record*, July 20, 1905: "One quality of the negro ... is that he shows no disposition to unionize or to strike in the aggregate, however embarrassing his striking as an individual may be"; "Labor in the South," *Manufacturers' Record*, May 15, 1886: "... one great cause of [the] rapid development of manufactures at the South is the comparative steadiness of labor in that section and the infrequency of strikes and wrangles ... [T]he difference in steadiness and freedom from interruption is an enormous advantage to Southern industry." In their classic study, Greene and Woodson acknowledged both the paternalist dynamic and the strikebreaking role of black workers, though they focused more closely on Northern industry in the early to mid-20th century. "The main factor in the increase of Negroes in the iron and steel industry," they wrote, "has been the general absence of the tendency among Negro workers to unite for collective bargaining." While their study highlighted the ways in which organized labor's racism reinforced the alienation of black workers from organizing efforts, they found black workers "so bound to the interests of their employers that little fear of their striking was entertained by factory owners." Lorenzo J. Greene and Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro Wage Earner* (Washington, DC: The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1930), 252.

ton's pro-industrialist philosophy," Eric Arnesen has written, "black workers were hardly strangers to classic forms of class conflict" during this period. In the lumber camps, the docks and levees, the mines and mills, black workers challenged, even if they could not disrupt completely, the accommodationists' pretense that they spoke for black Southerners generally.

Prominent accommodators opposed almost universally any attempt by black workers to raise their conditions through collective organization. Washington maintained an abiding hostility to trade unionism throughout his long public career, deriving less from (understandable) revulsion at organized labor's mostly horrendous record regarding black workers than from his strategic calculation that race progress would accrue through the masses demonstrating their utility to capital.⁵⁰ He had been deeply influenced by the anti-labor outlook of his mentors at the Hampton Institute and, despite a generally positive experience as a coal miner in the Knights of Labor, consistently derided the intervention of "professional labor agitators" in language compatible with the employers' anti-unionism. His response to a 1914 letter from a Pullman Porter representing 7000 workers "persecuted on every side" exemplifies this approach. Evading the author's complaint that the Pullman Company was "afraid that we will have a union among ourselves to fight them," and that management "discharge every man who starts any helpful movement," Washington responded with a vague message of support for an organization that would "help in maintaining a higher standard of efficiency, not only as employees but as men."⁵¹

Evidence from throughout the South makes clear that race leaders played a prominent role in inoculating black workers against the contagion of trade unionism. Often they did so under the direct, paid supervision of white employers. An 1891 cotton pickers' strike revealed the potential fracture lines among rural blacks: Delta field hands and landless workers overwhelmingly supported the strike while black landowners generally sided with white planters. A bi-racial posse dispatched to put down the strike in Arkansas' Lee and Crittenden counties killed 15 black workers and jailed six others.⁵² The collaboration between white and black elites in Alabama's Birmingham district was more dramatic: from the 1880s, prominent black Democrats directed "Negro welfare work" on behalf of local coal and iron bosses, a relationship formalized after the rise of Tuskegee. Under Washington's leadership, a steady stream of black teachers and welfare workers made their way to Birmingham's industrial Mecca, carrying his explicitly anti-union message to black workers. During the 1908 coal strike—in which the UMW was subjected to vicious race-baiting in the local press—race leaders came out squarely on the side of the operators, and again in 1920 Labor Department officials

⁵⁰ Harlan writes that Washington "all his life reflected the general viewpoint that Bryce [editor of Hampton's conservative *Southern Workman*] expressed." Cox concludes that the "essentially capitalist philosophy of individualism [led] Washington to take a consistently antilabor position in the continuing struggle between capital and labor." See Harlan, *Washington: Making of a Black Leader*, 90–91; Cox, "Leadership Among Negroes," 255.

⁵¹ Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery* (New York: A.L. Burt, 1901), 62; F. E. Edmunds to Washington, July 4, 1914; Washington to Edmunds, July 8, 1914, in Harlan (ed.), *BTW Papers*, vol. 13 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 81, 84.

⁵² Gordon, *Caste and Class*, 117–118. See also William F. Holmes, "The Arkansas Cotton Pickers' Strike of 1891 and the Demise of the Colored Farmers' Alliance," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 32 (1973), 107–113.

noted that “all of the Negro preachers [were] subsidized by the companies and were without exception preaching against the negroes joining the unions.”⁵³

Planters anxious to frustrate a challenge to their prerogative, Birmingham coal operators and steel kings, North Carolina tobacco manufacturers and Louisiana and Texas lumber barons all seemed acutely aware of the importance of racial divisions in maintaining their hold over labor costs, and of the utility of accommodationist hegemony for advancing their own aims. Southern industry’s invulnerability to trade unionism was widely attributed to the potency of these divisions, and employers showed deliberation in their efforts to maintain such a state of affairs. An especially forthright lumber company official determined to counter efforts of the Brotherhood of Timber Workers to organize Louisiana in 1911 advised his superiors that “there is one strong point that could be used effectively against [the BTW], if properly handled, and that is the negro question. No order can succeed in this country or in this section … where the negroes and whites are allowed to affiliate together on an equal social basis and if this information was judiciously disseminated it would have a splendid effect in breaking it up.” A year later the *Lumber Trade Journal* was warning employers that the IWW “knows no race or color. It accepts the negro as a member on an equality with the white man, and the most ignorant foreigner is equally if not more welcome … than is the skilled worker.”⁵⁴

These remarks only expressed in candid terms the usually unspoken basis of labor relations among Southern lumber operators. The Southern Pine Association—one of the two main employers’ organizations in the industry—attributed the absence of union organization to “racial antagonism between whites and Negroes.”⁵⁵ Internal records of the Southern Lumber Operators’ Association teem with evidence of management’s appreciation for the special vulnerability of black workers and their determination to prevent any tampering with the status quo. The response of a manager at Groveton, Texas, faced with a walkout over a missed payday is revealing in its delineation of the role reserved for black labor by the timber bosses: “Sixty-five men quit and are trying to get others to quit,” he reported. “Perhaps we can corral enough Negroes to operate.” Another reported in the midst of a campaign to root out union sympathizers that he was “not hiring any men at present but what I know, except for a few country niggers.”⁵⁶

The lumber operators’ acute understanding that the race issue offered a powerful antidote against unionization is unsurprising. What is remarkable is their ability to draw race leaders into their designs. Relying upon a substantial cadre of black ministers and educators, between 1910 and 1920 SLOA-sponsored speakers visited at least seven

⁵³ For an extensive discussion of Birmingham race leaders and their involvement with industrial elites, see my *Race, Class and Power*, especially Chapter 3, 81–106. On Tuskegee involvement in welfare work, see Stein, “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” 447–448, and C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 358–359. Labor Department observations on black preachers in the 1920 strike appear in Edwin C. Newdick, “Employers Foster Race Prejudice,” February 24, 1919, *Records of the Department of Labor*, RG 174, National Archives, Washington, DC.

⁵⁴ M. L. Alexander to M. L. Fleishel, November 4, 1911, Box 205, KLCR; *Lumber Trade Journal*, December 15, 1912.

⁵⁵ “Special Report on Industrial Conditions in the Mills and Logging Camps of the Southern Pine Association,” August 1918, Box 67b, Southern Pine Association Records, Louisiana State University Archives, Baton Rouge, cited in James E. Fickle, “Management Looks at the ‘Labor Problem’: The Southern Pine Industry During World War I and the Postwar Era,” *Journal of Southern History* 40 (1974), 68.

⁵⁶ Cited in Thad Sitton and James H. Conrad, *Nameless Towns: Texas Sawmill Communities, 1880–1942* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 113; J. W. Herndon to C. P. Myer, September 15, 1911, Box 197, KLCR.

Southern states in an attempt to neutralize union agitation and counter the black exodus out of the South. In the face of BTW attempts to organize in 1911, a manager from Brownel, Texas orchestrated a series of mass meetings led by a local black teacher (reported to be “a great deal above the average intelligence among the colored population” and “wholly on our side”) that passed resolutions renouncing the union and pledging loyalty to the company. Several years later, the Kirby Lumber Company contracted with I. W. Crawford to speak at employer-sponsored Emancipation Day celebrations and in 1917 offered him work “for at least twenty, and perhaps thirty days” lecturing black workers at 12 sawmills and five logging camps.⁵⁷

The lumber operators dramatically intensified their efforts in the postwar period. They directly sponsored at least three “race” newspapers aimed at containing black militancy and curtailing migration. The short-lived *Voice of Colored Labor* was published out of the Pythians’ Hall in Birmingham and circulated mainly in rural districts in Alabama and Mississippi. The *Negro Advocate*, printed in Arkansas (1917–1922) under the direction of the employer-subsidized black minister Milton Hampton, would, SLOA officials hoped, “keep the colored laborers of the South satisfied with their conditions[,] advise against the exodus … [and] elevate their morals.” Directors in New Orleans assured SLOA members that the newspapers’ “articles and editorials will be closely scrutinized by this office.” Their most remarkable feat involved the New Orleans-based *National Negro Voice*, however. A memo circulated among SLOA members along with the first edition introduced the publication as “a Negro paper that is being sponsored and controlled by a few large organizations whose members are employers of Negro labor.” The “aim and purpose of the paper,” members were informed, was to “combat the evil influence of the radical Negro papers and magazines published in the North.” It would be overseen by an employer-appointed Financial Secretary (to whom “all published material had to be submitted”) who would be “the only white man that will come in direct contact with the Negro editor and Manager [R. A. Flynn of New Orleans], who does not and will not know what organizations are financing the enterprise.”⁵⁸

The systematic attempt to inscribe racial divisions permanently into the contours of labor relations in lumber and maintain the continued exploitation of black workers at the heart of that system represented a highly sophisticated version of a strategy being pursued throughout the industrializing South. In their more candid moments leading white elites acknowledged that cheap black labor was the cornerstone upon which their New South would be raised. In that sense, at least, industrial exploitation and Jim Crow were organically intertwined. Reconciled for the foreseeable future to the imposition of white supremacy, imbued with a paternalist sense of moral guardianship over the less fortunate members of their race, and unapologetic about linking their fate to the ascendancy of the white “better classes,” middle-class race leaders pursued an elitist strategy that led them inevitably to forsake the interests of the black masses for whom they claimed to speak.

The accommodationist formula has been criticized, both by Washington’s contemporary critics and by present day scholars, mainly for its renunciation of the struggle for

⁵⁷ W. T. Hooker to C. P. Myer, August 14, 1911, Box 197, KLCR; Kirby Company to Crawford, June 6, 1917, Box 338, KLCR.

⁵⁸ *Voice of Colored Labor*, 1923, Box 343, KLCR; SLOA to All Members, November 5, 1918, Box 489, Kurth Collection, Forest History Collection, East Texas Research Center, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, TX.

civil and political equality, or at least for having forsaken the open pursuit of these aims. The outworn practice of juxtaposing protest and accommodation in an attempt to measure the tactical efficacy of each rests on the premise that one or the other might have delivered better results for the race as a whole. But this method ignores the shared class outlook embedded in the strategy espoused by both camps.⁵⁹ The critical issue about Washington and his co-thinkers is not whether they acquiesced in or fought surreptitiously against specific aspects of racial oppression in the South, but whether in their role as intermediaries between Southern capital and black labor they served—or could possibly advance—the best interests of “the race.” Alabama sharecropper Nate Shaw reminds us, eloquently, of Washington’s limitations. Criticizing him for “lean[ing] too much on the white people that controlled the money,” Shaw insisted that Washington “didn’t respect his race of people enough to go rock bottom with them … He wanted his people to do this, that, and the other, but he never did get to the roots of our troubles.” Historians concerned with reconstructing African American life in the Age of Washington have for too long ignored conspicuous evidence of black working-class dissent: it is time to let the Nate Shaws have their say.⁶⁰

Scholarship on relations between black elites and the black masses during the Age of Washington stands today at an important crossroads. While some of the recent literature, saddled by what Eric Foner has identified as a “desire for a history of celebration,”⁶¹ indicates a continuing reluctance to lift the veil on intraracial tensions, the elements of a more penetrating interpretive approach are evident, dispersed throughout some of the most exciting new scholarship at the margins where labor, women’s and African American history intersect.⁶² Even where it has hesitated in

⁵⁹ Despite their considerable differences, before the turn of the century both Washington and DuBois pursued elitist solutions to the predicament of black Southerners. But while DuBois looked to a “Talented Tenth” to lead the black masses, he never pursued the alliance with white elites so central to Washington’s outlook. After 1900, of course, the gulf between them widened further, and by the First World War the cadre that would form the NAACP began to pay serious attention to the predicament of black laborers and to openly criticize Southern white employers, an important shift precluded for Washington by his commitment to industrial accommodation. On the early symmetry between Washington and DuBois, see Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black–White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 73–75, and Adolph L. Reed Jr. *W. E. B. DuBois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 53–70.

⁶⁰ Theodore Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers: the Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 543.

⁶¹ Eric Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2002), xiv.

⁶² An abbreviated list of such scholarship would include, in order of publication, Thomas Holt, *Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina during Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); Neil McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Peter J. Rachleff, *Black Labor in Richmond, 1865–1890* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Joe William Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915–1932* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Janette Thomas Greenwood, *Bittersweet Legacy: The Black and White “Better Classes” in Charlotte, 1850–1910* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1994); Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” *Public Culture* 7 (1994), 107–146; Fon Louise Gordon, *Caste & Class: The Black Experience in Arkansas, 1880–1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1996); Tera W. Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997);

drawing the conclusions suggested by its own evidence or stumbled upon intracommunal tensions as a minor aside in a larger story, a rich evolving literature has begun to expose the need for a forthright engagement with the significance of class in the African American experience under Jim Crow.

Footnote 62 Continued

Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); Lynne B. Feldman, *A Sense of Place: Birmingham's Black Middle Class Community, 1890–1920* (Tuscaloosa, 1999); Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001); Brian Kelly, *Race, Class, and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1908–1921* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

