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# “We Are Not What We Seem”: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South

Robin D. G. Kelley

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Each day when you see us black folk upon the dusty land of the farms or upon the hard pavement of the city streets, you usually take us for granted and think you know us, but our history is far stranger than you suspect, and we are not what we seem.

—Richard Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices*, 1940

The Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, “Get out of here!” We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn’t know what he is missing.

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 1935

On the factory floor in North Carolina tobacco factories, where women stemmers were generally not allowed to sit or to talk with one another, it was not uncommon for them to break out in song. Singing in unison not only reinforced a sense of collective identity in these black workers but the songs themselves—most often religious hymns—ranged from veiled protests against the daily indignities of the factory to utopian visions of a life free of difficult wage work.<sup>1</sup>

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I want to dedicate this essay to Herbert Aptheker in recognition of the fiftieth anniversary of *American Negro Slave Revolts*, a pioneering work that inspired this essay, and to the late Brenda McCallum, a brilliant and imaginative historian of black working-class culture who passed unexpectedly and prematurely in September of 1992.

<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985), 140.

Throughout the urban South in the early twentieth century, black women household workers were accustomed to staging so-called incipient strikes, quitting or threatening to quit just before important social affairs to be hosted by their employers. The strategy's success often depended on a collective refusal on the part of other household workers to fill in.<sup>2</sup>

In August 1943, on the College Hills bus line in Birmingham, Alabama, black riders grew impatient with a particularly racist bus driver who within minutes twice drew his gun on black passengers, intentionally passed one black woman's stop, and ejected a black man who complained on the woman's behalf. According to a bus company report, "the negroes then started ringing bell for the entire block and no one would alight when he stopped."<sup>3</sup>

These daily, unorganized, evasive, seemingly spontaneous actions form an important yet neglected part of African-American political history. By ignoring or belittling such everyday acts of resistance and privileging the public utterances of black elites, several historians of southern race relations concluded, as Lester C. Lamon did in his study of Tennessee, that black working people "remained silent, either taking the line of least resistance or implicitly adopting the American faith in hard work and individual effort."<sup>4</sup> But as Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, and countless cases like those recounted above suggest, the appearance of silence and accommodation was not only deceiving but frequently intended to deceive. Beneath the veil of consent lies a hidden history of unorganized, everyday conflict waged by African-American working people. Once we explore in greater detail those daily conflicts and the social and cultural spaces where ordinary people felt free to articulate their opposition, we can begin to ask the questions that will enable us to rewrite the political history of the Jim Crow South to incorporate such actions and actors.

Drawing examples from recent studies of African Americans in the urban South, mostly in the 1930s and 1940s, I would like to sketch out a research agenda that might allow us to render visible hidden forms of resistance; to examine how class, gender, and race shape working-class consciousness; and to bridge the gulf between the social and cultural world of the "everyday" and political struggles.<sup>5</sup> First and

<sup>2</sup> Tera W. Hunter, "Household Workers in the Making: Afro-American Women in Atlanta and the New South, 1861-1920" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1990), 76-82.

<sup>3</sup> "Report Involving Race Question," Aug. 1943, p. 2, box 10, Cooper Green Papers (Birmingham Public Library, Birmingham, Ala.).

<sup>4</sup> Lester C. Lamon, *Black Tennesseans, 1900-1930* (Knoxville, 1977), 18. See also, for example, Neil McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana, 1989); John Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (Urbana, 1977); Jack Temple Kirby, *Darkness at the Dawn: Race and Reform in the Progressive South* (Philadelphia, 1972); Paul D. Casdorph, *Republicans, Negroes, and Progressives in the South, 1912-1916* (University, Ala., 1981); Robert Haws, ed., *The Age of Segregation: Race Relations in the South, 1890-1954* (Jackson, 1978); Margaret Law Callcott, *The Negro in Maryland Politics, 1870-1912* (Baltimore, 1969); I. A. Newby, *Black Carolinians: A History of Blacks in South Carolina from 1895-1968* (Columbia, S.C., 1973); and George C. Wright, *Life behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge, 1985). For the nineteenth century, see Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> My definition of "urban" includes mining towns and company suburbs that have a significant black proletariat. Because of space considerations I chose not to include rural areas. On twentieth-century rural resistance, see, for example, William Bennett Bizzell, "Farm Tenantry in the United States" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1921), 267-68; Ray Stannard Baker, *Following the Color Line: American Negro Citizenship in the Progressive Era*

foremost, my thoughts grow out of rereading Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts*, a pioneering study that is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary this year. In it Aptheker gave us a framework to study the hidden and disguised, not only locating acts of resistance and plans for rebellion among slaves but also showing how their opposition shaped all of antebellum southern society, politics, and daily life.<sup>6</sup> Second, I am indebted to scholars who work on South Asia, especially the political anthropologist James C. Scott. Scott and other proponents of subaltern studies maintain that, despite appearances of consent, oppressed groups challenge those in power by constructing a "hidden transcript," a dissident political culture that manifests itself in daily conversations, folklore, jokes, songs, and other cultural practices. One also finds the hidden transcript emerging "on stage" in spaces controlled by the powerful, though almost always in disguised forms. The submerged social and cultural worlds of oppressed people frequently surface in everyday forms of resistance—theft, footdragging, the destruction of property—or, more rarely, in open attacks on individuals, institutions, or symbols of domination. Together, the "hidden transcripts" that are created in aggrieved communities and expressed through culture and the daily acts of resistance and survival constitute what Scott calls "infrapolitics." As he puts it, "the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups is, like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum. That it should be invisible . . . is in large part by design—a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power."<sup>7</sup>

Like Scott, I use the concept of infrapolitics to describe the daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts that often inform organized political move-

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(1908; New York, 1964), 76–77; Glenn N. Sisk, "Alabama Black Belt: A Social History, 1875–1917" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1951), 277–87; Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner, and Mary R. Gardner, *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (Chicago, 1941), 396–98; Arthur F. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties* (Chapel Hill, 1936), 173–74; and Albert C. Smith, "'Southern Violence' Reconsidered: Arson as Protest in Black Belt Georgia, 1865–1910," *Journal of Southern History*, 55 (Nov. 1985), 527–64.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943). See also his essays and pamphlets, intended for the kind of working-class audiences he had been organizing: Herbert Aptheker, *Negro Slave Revolts in the United States, 1526–1860* (New York, 1939); Herbert Aptheker, *The Negro in the Civil War* (New York, 1938); and Herbert Aptheker, "Maroons within the Present Limits of the United States," *Journal of Negro History*, 24 (April 1939), 167–84. For an appraisal of *American Negro Slave Revolts* and a history of responses from the historical profession, see Herbert Shapiro, "The Impact of the Aptheker Thesis: A Retrospective View of *American Negro Slave Revolts*," *Science and Society*, 48 (Spring 1984), 52–73.

<sup>7</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990), esp. 183. See also James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985); and James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, 1976). For a useful critique, see Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia," *Modern Asian Studies*, 22 (Feb. 1988), 189–224. The precursors of Scott's work include E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1966); E. P. Thompson, "The Crime of Anonymity," in *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E. P. Thompson, and Cal Winslow (New York, 1975), 255–344; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, 1984); Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*; Raymond A. Bauer and Alice H. Bauer, "Day to Day Resistance to Slavery," *Journal of Negro History*, 37 (Oct. 1942), 388–419; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 599–621; Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 241–44; Alex Lichtenstein, "That Disposition to Theft, with which they have been Branded': Moral Economy, Slave Management, and the Law," *Journal of Social History*, 22 (Spring 1988), 413–40; Sterling Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery," *Massachusetts Review*, 9 (Summer 1968), 417–37.

ments. I am not suggesting that the realm of infrapolitics is any more or less important or effective than what we traditionally consider politics. Instead, I want to suggest that the political history of oppressed people cannot be understood *without* reference to infrapolitics, for these daily acts have a cumulative effect on power relations. While the meaning and effectiveness of acts differ according to circumstances, they make a difference, whether they were intended to or not. Thus, one measure of the power and historical importance of the informal infrapolitics of the oppressed is the response of those who dominate traditional politics. Daily acts of resistance and survival have had consequences for existing power relations, and the powerful have deployed immense resources in response. Knowing how the powerful interpret, redefine, and respond to the thoughts and actions of the oppressed is just as important as identifying and analyzing opposition. The policies, strategies, or symbolic representations of those in power—what Scott calls the “official” or “public” transcript—cannot be understood without examining the infrapolitics of oppressed groups. The approach I am proposing will help illuminate how power operates, how effective the southern power structure was in maintaining social order, and how seemingly innocuous, individualistic acts of survival and opposition shaped southern urban politics, workplace struggles, and the social order generally. I take the lead of the ethnographer Lila Abu-Lughod, who argues that everyday forms of resistance ought to be “diagnostic” of power. Instead of seeing these practices primarily as examples of the “dignity and heroism of resisters,” she argues that they can “teach us about the complex interworkings of historically changing structures of power.”<sup>8</sup>

An infrapolitical approach requires that we substantially redefine our understanding of politics. Too often politics is defined by *how* people participate rather than *why*; by traditional definition the question of what is political hinges on whether or not groups are involved in elections, political parties, grass-roots social movements. Yet, the *how* seems far less important than the *why* since many of the so-called real political institutions have not proved effective for, or even accessible to, oppressed people. By shifting our focus to what motivated disenfranchised black working people to struggle and what strategies they developed, we may discover that their participation in “mainstream” politics—including their battle for the franchise—grew out of the very circumstances, experiences, and memories that impelled many to steal from an employer, to join a mutual benefit association, or to spit in a bus driver’s face. In other words, those actions all reflect, to varying degrees, larger political struggles. For southern blacks in the age of Jim Crow, politics was not separate from lived experience or the imagined world of what is possible. It was the many battles to roll back constraints, to exercise power over, or create space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominated their lives.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, “The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women,” *American Ethnologist*, 17 (no. 1, 1990), 55. I’m grateful to Victoria Wolcott for bringing this source to my attention.

<sup>9</sup> My recasting of “the political” is partly derived from my reading of Geoff Eley, “Labor History, Social History, *Alltagsgeschichte*: Experience, Culture, and the Politics of the Everyday—A New Direction for German Social History?” *Journal of Modern History*, 61 (June 1989), 297–343.

Using this revised framework for understanding power, resistance, and politics, the following explores three sites of urban black working-class opposition in the American South in the early twentieth century: the semiprivate/semipublic spaces of community and household, the workplace, and public space. My remarks are intended to be interrogations that may lead to new ways of understanding working-class politics.

### At Home, at Play, at Prayer

Several southern labor and urban historians have begun to unveil the hidden social and cultural world of black working people and to assess its political significance. They have established that during the era of Jim Crow, black working people carved out social space and constructed what George Lipsitz calls a "culture of opposition" through which to articulate the hidden transcript free from the watchful eye of white authority or the moralizing of the black middle class. Those social spaces constituted a partial refuge from the humiliations and indignities of racism, class pretensions, and waged work. African-American communities often created an alternative culture emphasizing collectivist values, mutuality, and fellowship. There were vicious, exploitative relationships within southern black communities, particularly across class and gender lines, and the tentacles of Jim Crow touched even black institutions. But the social and cultural institutions and ideologies that ultimately informed black opposition placed more emphasis on communal values and collective uplift than the prevailing class-conscious, individualist ideology of the white ruling classes. As Earl Lewis so aptly put it, African Americans turned segregation into "congregation."<sup>10</sup>

Ironically, segregation facilitated the creation and maintenance of the unmonitored, unauthorized social sites in which black workers could freely articulate the hidden transcript. Jim Crow ordinances ensured that churches, bars, social clubs, barbershops, beauty salons, even alleys, remained "black" space. When southern white ruling groups suspected dissident activities among African Americans, they

<sup>10</sup> Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley, 1991), 10; George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia, 1988); Elsa Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of St. Luke," *Signs*, 14 (Spring 1989), 610–33; Elsa Barkley Brown, "'Not Alone to Build This Pile of Bricks': Institution Building and Community in Richmond, Virginia," paper presented at the conference "The Age of Booker T. Washington," University of Maryland, College Park, May 3, 1990 (in Robin D. G. Kelley's possession); Elsa Barkley Brown, "Uncle Ned's Children: Richmond, Virginia's Black Community, 1890–1930" (Ph.D. diss., Kent State University, in progress); Michael K. Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana, 1993); Hunter, "Household Workers in the Making"; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 1990); Robert Korstad, "'Daybreak of Freedom': Tobacco Workers and the CIO, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 1943–1950" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1987); Joe William Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915–1932* (Urbana, 1990). Although Peter J. Rachleff's outstanding book and his even more prodigious dissertation are limited to the nineteenth century and therefore beyond the scope of this essay, he offers one of the most sophisticated discussions of the relationship between community, culture, work, and self-activity. Peter J. Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South: Richmond, Virginia, 1865–1890* (Philadelphia, 1984), 109–15; Peter J. Rachleff, "Black, White, and Gray: Race and Working-Class Activism in Richmond, Virginia, 1865–1890" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1981).

tried to monitor and sometimes to shut down black social spaces—usually swiftly and violently. During World War II, as Howard Odum observed, mere rumors of black uprisings made any black gathering place fair game for extralegal, often brutal invasions. More significantly, employers and police officials actively cultivated black stool pigeons to maintain tabs on the black community. Clearly, even if historians have underestimated the potential threat that rests within black-controlled spaces, the southern rulers did not.<sup>11</sup>

Grass-roots black community organizations such as mutual benefit societies, church groups, and gospel quartets were crucial to black people's survival. Through them, African Americans created and sustained bonds of community, mutual support networks, and a collectivist ethos that shaped black working-class political struggle. As Elsa Barkley Brown points out in her work on Richmond, Virginia, mutual benefit societies, like many other black organizations, "institutionalized a vision of community based on notions of collectivity and mutuality even as [they] struggled with the practical problems of implementing and sustaining such a vision." Although the balance of power in these organizations was not always equal, with males and the middle class sometimes dominant, Brown demonstrates that within benevolent societies all members played some role in constructing a vision of the community.<sup>12</sup>

Yet we need to acknowledge intraracial class tensions. Mutual disdain, disappointment, and even fear occasionally found their way into the public transcript. Some middle-class blacks, for example, regarded the black poor as lazy, self-destructive, and prone to criminal behavior. Geraldine Moore, a black middle-class resident of Birmingham, Alabama, wrote that many poor blacks in her city knew "nothing but waiting for a handout of some kind, drinking, cursing, fighting and prostitution." On the other hand, in his study of a small Mississippi town, the sociologist Allison Davis found that "lower class" blacks often "accused upper-class persons (the 'big shots,' the 'Big Negroes') of snobbishness, color preference, extreme selfishness, disloyalty in caste leadership, ('sellin' out to white folks'), and economic exploitation of their patients and customers."<sup>13</sup>

To understand the significance of class conflict among African Americans, we need to examine how specific communities are constructed and sustained rather than to presume the existence (until recently) of a tight-knit, harmonious black

<sup>11</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 120; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*; Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst, 1988), 224–37; Howard Odum, *Race and Rumors of Race: Challenge to American Crisis* (Chapel Hill, 1943), 96–104; Dolores E. Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender, and Class in a New South Community* (Philadelphia, 1985), 121. For the antebellum period, see Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 59. The success of stool pigeons often depended on the strategies black working people used to resist exploitation. Black informers had to maintain a low profile and don a mask in front of other black folk since they were less effective as spies without entry into the community of workers.

<sup>12</sup> Elsa Barkley Brown, "Not Alone to Build This Pile of Bricks"; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Woman's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993); Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*; Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South*.

<sup>13</sup> Geraldine Moore, *Behind the Ebony Mask* (Birmingham, 1961), 15; Davis, Gardner, and Gardner, *Deep South*, 230.

community. This romantic view of a “golden age” of black community—an age when any elder could beat a misbehaving child, when the black middle class mingled with the poor and offered themselves as “role models,” when black professionals cared more about their downtrodden race than about their bank accounts—is not just disingenuous; it has deterred serious historical research on class relations within African-American communities. As a dominant trope in the popular social science literature on the so-called underclass, it has hindered explanations of the contemporary crisis in the urban United States by presuming a direct causal relationship between the disappearance of middle-class role models as a result of desegregation and the so-called moral degeneration of the black jobless and underemployed working class left behind in the cities.<sup>14</sup>

Such a reassessment of African-American communities would also require us to rethink the role of black working-class families in shaping ideology and strategies of resistance. Social historians and feminist theorists have made critical contributions to our understanding of the role of women’s (and, to a lesser degree, children’s) unpaid work in reproducing the labor power of male industrial workers and maintaining capitalism.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, we still know very little about power relations and conflicts within black working-class families, the role of family life in the development of class consciousness (especially among children), and how these things shape oppositional strategies at the workplace and in neighborhoods. For instance, if patriarchal families enabled exploited male wage earners to control and exploit the labor of women and children, then one might find a material basis to much intrafamily conflict, as well as hidden transcripts and resistance strategies framed within an ideology that justifies the subordinate status of women and children.<sup>16</sup> We might,

<sup>14</sup> The best-known advocate of this position is William J. Wilson. See William J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago, 1987), 56–57. Recent historical literature and a much older sociological literature challenge Wilson’s claim of a “golden age” of black community. See especially Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*; Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*; Kenneth Marvin Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877–1915* (Urbana, 1991); Robin D. G. Kelley, “The Black Poor and the Politics of Opposition in a New South City,” in *The Underclass Debate: Views from History*, ed. Michael Katz (Princeton, 1993), 293–333; E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York, 1957); St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945; 2 vols., New York, 1962), II, 526–63; Davis, Gardner, and Gardner, *Deep South*, 230–36.

<sup>15</sup> For a sampling of historical studies of African-American families, see Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York, 1976); James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850–1970* (Urbana, 1980); Andrew Billingsley, *Black Families in White America* (Englewood Cliffs, 1968); Sharon Harley, “For the Good of Family and Race: Gender, Work, and Domestic Roles in the Black Community, 1880–1930,” *Signs*, 15 (Winter 1990), 336–49; and Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*. On women’s unpaid labor, the reproduction of male labor power, and the maintenance of capitalism, see Emily Blumenfeld and Susan Mann, “Domestic Labour and the Reproduction of Labour Power: Towards an Analysis of Women, the Family, and Class,” in *Hidden in the Household: Women’s Domestic Labour under Capitalism*, ed. Bonnie Fox (Toronto, 1980), 267–307; Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York, 1990); Martha E. Gimenez, “The Dialectics of Waged and Unwaged Work: Waged Work, Domestic Labor and Household Survival in the United States,” in *Work without Wages: Domestic Labor and Self-Employment within Capitalism*, ed. Jane L. Collins and Martha E. Gimenez (Albany, 1990), 25–45; and Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York, 1982).

<sup>16</sup> Heidi Hartmann, “The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class, and Political Struggle: The Example of Housework,” *Signs*, 6 (Spring 1981), 366–94; Lois Rita Helmbold, “Beyond the Family Economy: Black and White Working-Class Women during the Great Depression,” *Feminist Studies*, 13 (Fall 1987), 629–55; Susan Mann, “Slavery, Sharecropping, and Sexual Inequality,” *Signs*, 14 (Summer 1989), 774–98.



therefore, ask how conflicts and the exploitation of labor power in the family and household shape larger working-class politics.

Indeed, in part because most scholarship privileges the workplace and production over the household and reproduction, the role of families in the formation of class consciousness and in developing strategies of resistance has not been sufficiently explored. The British women's historian Carolyn Steedman, for example, points out that radical histories of working people have been slow "to discuss the *development* of class consciousness (as opposed to its expression)" and to explore "it as a learned position, *learned* in childhood, and often through the exigencies of difficult and lonely lives." Likewise, Elizabeth Faue asks us to look more carefully at the formation of class, race, and gender identities long before young people enter the wage labor force. She adds that "focusing on reproduction would give meaning to the relationship between working class family organization and behavior and working class collective action and labor organization."<sup>17</sup>

Such a reexamination of black working-class families should provide insights into how the hidden transcript informs public, collective action. We might return, for example, to the common claim that black mothers and grandmothers in the age of Jim Crow raised their boys to show deference to white people. Were black working-class parents "emasculating" potential militants, as several black male writers argued in the 1960s, or were they arming their boys with a sophisticated understanding of the political and cultural terrain of struggle?<sup>18</sup> And what about black women's testimony that their mothers taught them values and strategies that helped them survive and resist race, class, and gender oppression? Once we begin to look at the family as a central (if not *the* central) institution where political ideologies are formed and reproduced, we may discover that households hold the key to understanding particular episodes of black working-class resistance. Elsa Barkley Brown has begun to search for the sources of opposition in black working-class households. In an essay on African-American families and political activism during Reconstruction, she not only demonstrates the central role of black women (and even children) in Republican party politics, despite the restriction of suffrage to adult males, but also persuasively argues that newly emancipated African Americans viewed the franchise as the collective property of the whole family. Men who did not vote according

<sup>17</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick, 1986), 13; Elizabeth Faue, "Reproducing the Class Struggle: Perspectives on the Writing of Working Class History," paper presented at the meeting of the Social Science History Association, Minneapolis, Oct. 19, 1990 (in Kelley's possession), 8. See also Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 15; and Elizabeth Faue, "Gender, Class, and the Politics of Work in Women's History," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, Chicago, Dec. 1991 (in Kelley's possession).

<sup>18</sup> Whereas most black male social scientists suggested that black mothers inflicted irreparable psychological damage on their sons, feminist scholars understood that learning the dominant codes and social conventions of the South was necessary for survival. See, for example, Calvin Hernton, *Sex and Racism in America* (Garden City, 1965); William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York, 1968), 51; Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York, 1984); Patricia Morton, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (Westport, 1991), 116; Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied*, 45; and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign against Lynching* (New York, 1979), 142.

to the family's wishes were severely disciplined or ostracized from community institutions.<sup>19</sup>

Black workers, therefore, participated in or witnessed oppositional politics—whether in community institutions or households—before they entered the workplace or the labor movement. Average black workers probably experienced greater participatory democracy in community- and neighborhood-based institutions than in the interracial trade unions that claimed to speak for them. Anchored in a prophetic religious ideology, these collectivist institutions and practices took root and flourished in a profoundly undemocratic society. For instance, Tera Hunter demonstrates that benevolent and secret societies constituted the organizational structures through which black washerwomen organized strikes. In separate studies, Michael Honey and Robert Korstad suggest that black religious ideology and even some churches were key factors in the success of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Workers union in Memphis, Tennessee, and Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Brenda McCallum illustrates that black gospel quartet circuits were crucial to the expansion and legitimation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in Birmingham, Alabama. My book argues that black working people enveloped the Alabama Communist party with a prophetic religious ideology and collectivist values that had grown out of black communities. The subcultures of working people do not always or automatically suffuse formal working-class organizations. The relationship is dialectical; the political culture that permeated labor organizations, including radical left-wing movements, often conflicted with aspects of working-class culture. The question historians might explore is whether certain interracial labor organizations were unable to mobilize sufficient black support because they failed to work through black community institutions or to acknowledge, if not to embrace, the cultural values of the African-American working class.<sup>20</sup>

Much of southern black working-class culture falls outside “conventional” labor history, in part because historians have limited their scope to public action and formal organization. Part of the problem is that those who frequented the places of rest, relaxation, recreation, and restoration rarely maintained archives or recorded the everyday conversations and noises that filled the bars, dance halls, blues clubs, barbershops, beauty salons, and street corners of the black community. Nevertheless, folklorists, anthropologists, oral historians, musicians, and writers fascinated by “Negro life” preserved cultural texts that allow scholars access to the hidden tran-

<sup>19</sup> On the political ramifications of how southern black mothers raised their daughters, see Elsa Barkley Brown, “Mothers of Mind,” *Sage*, 6 (Summer 1989), 3–10; and Elsa Barkley Brown, “African-American Women’s Quilting: A Framework for Conceptualizing and Teaching African-American Women’s History,” *Signs*, 14 (Summer 1989), 928–29. Elsa Barkley Brown, “To Catch the Vision of Freedom: Reconstructing Southern Black Women’s Political History, 1865–1885,” paper presented at the workshop, “Historical Perspectives on Race and Racial Ideologies,” Center for Afro-American and African Studies, University of Michigan, Nov. 22, 1991 (in Kelley’s possession).

<sup>20</sup> Brenda McCallum, “Songs of Work and Songs of Worship: Sanctifying Black Unionism in the Southern City of Steel,” *New York Folklore*, 14 (nos. 1 and 2, 1988), 19–20; Hunter, “Household Workers in the Making,” 151–86; Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American History*, 75 (Dec. 1988), 786–811; Korstad, “‘Daybreak of Freedom’”; Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*.

script. Using those texts, pioneering scholars and critics, including Amiri Baraka, Lawrence Levine, and Sterling Stuckey, have demonstrated that African-American working people created an oppositional culture that represents at least a partial rejection of the dominant ideology and that was forged in the struggle against class and racial domination. The challenge for southern labor historians is to determine how this rich expressive culture—which was frequently at odds with formal working-class institutions—shaped and reflected black working-class opposition.<sup>21</sup>

Even modes of leisure could undergird opposition. Of course, black working-class popular culture was created more to give pleasure than to challenge or explain domination. But people thought before they acted, and what they thought shaped, and was shaped by, cultural production and consumption. Moreover, for members of a class whose long workdays were spent in backbreaking, low-paid wage work in settings pervaded by racism, the places where they played were more than relatively free spaces in which to articulate grievances and dreams. They were places that enabled African Americans to take back their bodies, to recuperate, to be together. Two of the most popular sites were dance halls and blues clubs. Despite opposition from black religious leaders and segments of the black middle class, as well as many white employers, black working people of both sexes shook, twisted, and flaunted their overworked bodies, drank, talked, flirted and—in spite of occasional fights—reinforced their sense of community. Whether it was the call and response of a blues man's lyrics or the sight of hundreds moving in unison on a hardwood dance floor, the form and content of such leisure activities were unmistakably collective.<sup>22</sup>

Much African-American popular culture can be characterized as alternative rather than oppositional.<sup>23</sup> Most people went to parties, dances, and clubs to escape from the world of assembly lines, relief lines, and color lines and to leave momentarily the individual and collective battles against racism, sexism, and material deprivation. But their search for the sonic, visceral pleasures of music and fellowship, for the sensual pleasures of food, drink, and dancing was not just about escaping

<sup>21</sup> Eley, "Labor History, Social History, *Alltagsgeschichte*," 311–12. Important studies that move discussions of working-class culture beyond the trade union and the sphere of production include George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940's* (Urbana, forthcoming, 1994); Francis G. Couvares, *The Remaking of Pittsburgh: Class and Culture in an Industrializing City, 1877–1919* (Albany, 1984); Kathy Lee Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986); Steven J. Ross, *Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure, and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788–1890* (New York, 1985); and Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (New York, 1983). LeRoi Jones, *Blues People* (New York, 1963); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977), xi; Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York, 1987); Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore"; Hazel Carby, "'It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime': The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," *Radical America*, 20 (no. 4, 1987), 9–22; Charles P. Henry, *Culture and African-American Politics* (Bloomington, 1990); John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia, 1989); McCallum, "Songs of Work and Songs of Worship," 9–33; Gladys-Marie Fry, *Night Riders in Black Folk History* (Knoxville, 1975).

<sup>22</sup> On the social meaning of dance halls and blues clubs in southern black life, see Hunter, "Household Workers in the Making," 92–93; Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*, 99–100; Wright, *Life behind a Veil*, 138; Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> My use of the term *alternative* cultures is borrowed from Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London, 1980), 41–42.



Black men relaxing in a popular bar in Atlanta, Georgia, c. 1940s.  
*Courtesy J. Neal Montgomery Collection.*

the vicissitudes of southern life. They went with people who had a shared knowledge of cultural forms, people with whom they felt kinship, people with whom they shared stories about the day or the latest joke, people who shared a vernacular whose grammar and vocabulary struggled to articulate the beauty and burden of their lives. Places of leisure allowed freer sexual expression, particularly for women, whose sexuality was often circumscribed by employers, family members, the law, and the fear of sexual assault in a society with few protections for black women. Knowing what happens in these spaces of pleasure can help us understand the solidarity black people have shown at political mass meetings, illuminate the bonds of fellowship one finds in churches and voluntary associations, and unveil the *conflicts* across class and gender lines that shape and constrain these collective struggles.

When we consider the needs of employers and the dominance of the Protestant work ethic in American culture, these events were resistive, though not consciously. Speaking of the African diaspora in general, and that in Britain in particular, cultural critic Paul Gilroy argues that black working people who spent time and precious scarce money at the dance halls, blues clubs, and house parties “see waged work as itself a form of servitude. At best, it is viewed as a necessary evil and is sharply counterposed to the more authentic freedoms that can only be enjoyed in nonwork time. The black body is here celebrated as an instrument of pleasure rather than an instrument of labor. The nighttime becomes the right time, and the space

allocated for recovery and recuperation is assertively and provocatively occupied by the pursuit of leisure and pleasure."<sup>24</sup>

In southern cities where working-class blacks set Friday and Saturday nights aside for the "pursuit of leisure and pleasure," some of the most intense skirmishes between such blacks and authority erupted during and after weekend gatherings. During World War II in Birmingham, for example, racial conflicts on public transportation on Friday and Saturday nights were commonplace; many of the incidents involved black youths returning from dances and parties. The young men and women who rode public transportation in groups were energized by a sense of social solidarity rooted in a shared culture, common friends, and generational identity, not to mention naïveté as to the possible consequences of "acting up" in white-dominated public space. Leaving social sites that had reinforced a sense of collectivity, sometimes feeling the effects of alcohol and reefer, many young black passengers were emboldened. On the South Bessemer line, which passed some of the popular black dance halls, white passengers and operators dreaded the "unbearable" presence of large numbers of African Americans who "pushed and shoved" white riders at will. As one conductor noted, "negroes are rough and boisterous when leaving down town dances at this time of night."<sup>25</sup>

The nighttime also afforded black working people the opportunity to become something other than workers. In a world where clothes signified identity and status, "dressing up" was a way of shedding the degradation of work and collapsing status distinctions between themselves and their oppressors. As one Atlanta domestic worker remembers, the black business district of Auburn Avenue was "where we dressed up, because we couldn't dress up during the day. . . . We'd dress up and put on our good clothes and go to the show on Auburn Avenue. And you were going places. It was like white folks' Peachtree."<sup>26</sup> Seeing oneself and others "dressed up" was important to constructing a collective identity based on something other than wage work, presenting a public challenge to the dominant stereotypes of the black body, and shoring up a sense of dignity that was perpetually under assault. In these efforts to re-present the body through dress, African Americans wielded a double-edged sword, since the styles they adopted to combat racism all too frequently reinforced, rather than challenged, bourgeois notions of respectability. Yet, by their dress as by their leisure, black people took back their bodies.

Clothing, as a badge of oppression or an act of transgression, is crucial to understanding opposition by subordinate groups. Thus black veterans were beaten and lynched for insisting on wearing their military uniforms in public. A less-known but equally potent example is the zoot suit, which became popular during World War II. While the suit itself was not created and worn as a direct political statement,

<sup>24</sup> Paul Gilroy, "One Nation under a Groove: The Cultural Politics of 'Race' and Racism in Britain," in *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Minneapolis, 1990), 274.

<sup>25</sup> "Report Involving Race Question," June 1943, p. 1, box 10, Green Papers.

<sup>26</sup> Clifford M. Kuhn, Harlon E. Joye, and E. Bernard West, *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914-1948* (Atlanta, 1990), 39.

the language and culture of zoot suiters emphasized ethnic identity and rejected subservience. Young black males created a fast-paced, improvisational language that sharply contrasted with the passive stereotype of the stuttering, tongue-tied Sambo, and whereas whites commonly addressed them as “boy,” zoot suiters made a fetish of calling each other “man.” The zoot suiters constructed an identity in which their gendered and racial meanings were inseparable; they opposed racist oppression through public displays of masculinity. Moreover, because fabric rationing regulations instituted by the War Production Board forbade the sale and manufacturing of zoot suits, wearing the suit (which had to be purchased through informal networks) was seen by white servicemen as a pernicious act of anti-Americanism—a view compounded by the fact that most zoot suiters were able-bodied men who refused to enlist or found ways to dodge the draft. A Harlem zoot suiter interviewed by black social psychologist Kenneth Clark declared to the scholarly audience for whom Clark’s research was intended: “By [the] time you read this I will be fighting for Uncle Sam, the bitches, and I do not like it worth a dam. I’m not a spy or a saboteur, but I don’t like goin’ over there fightin’ for the white man—so be it.” It is not a coincidence that whites who assaulted black and Chicano zoot suiters across the country during the fateful summer of 1943 took great pains to strip the men or mutilate the suits.<sup>27</sup>

While no one, to my knowledge, has investigated zoot suiters in the South, they undoubtedly were a presence on the wartime urban landscape. As Howard Odum observed during the early 1940s, the mere image of these draped-shape-clad hipsters struck fear into the hearts of many white southerners. On Birmingham’s already overcrowded buses and streetcars during World War II, some of these zooted “baaad niggers” put on outrageous public displays of resistance that left witnesses in awe, though their transgressive acts did not lead directly to improvements in conditions, nor were they intended to. Some boldly sat down next to white female passengers and challenged operators to move them, often with knife in hand. Others refused to pay their fares or simply picked fights with bus drivers or white passengers. Nevertheless, like the folk hero himself, the Stagolee-type rebel was not always admired by other working-class black passengers. Some were embarrassed by his actions; the more sympathetic feared for his life. Black passengers on the Pratt-Ensley streetcar in 1943, for example, told a rebellious young man who was about to challenge the conductor to a fight “to hush before he got killed.” Besides, black hipsters were hardly social bandits. Some were professional hustlers whose search for pleasure and avoidance of waged labor often meant exploiting the exploited. Black hustlers

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth B. Clark and James Barker, “The Zoot Effect in Personality: A Race Riot Participant,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 40 (April 1945), 145. See also Robin D. G. Kelley, “The Riddle of the Zoot: Malcolm Little and Black Cultural Politics during World War II,” in *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image*, ed. Joe Wood (New York, 1992), 155–82; Stuart Cosgrove, “The Zoot-Suit and Style Warfare,” *History Workshop Journal*, 18 (Autumn 1984), 77–91; Mauricio Mazon, *The Zoot-Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation* (Austin, 1984); Eric Lott, “Double V, Double-Time: Bebop’s Politics of Style,” *Callaloo*, 11 (no. 3, 1988), 597–605; Kobena Mercer, “Black Hair / Style Politics,” *New Formations*, 3 (Winter 1987), 49; Bruce M. Tyler, “Black Jive and White Repression,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 16 (no. 4, 1989), 31–66.

took pride in their ability to establish parasitical relationships with women wage earners or sex workers, and those former hipsters who recorded memories in print wrote quite often of living off women, in many cases by outright pimping. The black male hipsters of the zoot suit generation remind us that the creation of an alternative culture can simultaneously challenge *and* reinforce existing power relations.<sup>28</sup>

Lastly, I want to briefly leap from the “bad,” lawless, secular world to the sacred — a realm of practice to which historians have paid great attention. Despite the almost axiomatic way the church becomes central to black working-class culture and politics, religion is almost always treated simply as culture, ideology, and organization. We need to recognize that the sacred and the spirit world were also often understood and invoked by African Americans as weapons to protect themselves or to attack others. How do historians make sense of, say, conjure as a strategy of resistance, retaliation, or defense in the daily lives of some working-class African Americans? How do we interpret divine intervention, especially when one’s prayers are *answered*? How does the belief that God is by one’s side affect one’s willingness to fight with police, leave an abusive relationship, stand up to a foreman, participate in a strike, steal, or break tools? Can a sign from above, a conversation with a ghost, a spell cast by an enemy, or talking in tongues unveil the hidden transcript? If a worker turns to a root doctor or prayer rather than to a labor union to make an employer less evil, is that “false consciousness”? These are not idle questions. Most of the oral narratives and memoirs of southern black workers speak of such events or moments as having enormous material consequences.<sup>29</sup> Of course, reliance on the divine or on the netherworlds of conjure was rarely, if ever, the only resistance or defense strategy used by black working people, but in their minds, bodies, and social relationships this was real power — power of which neither the CIO, the Populists, nor the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) could boast. With the exception of Vincent Harding, no historian that I know of since W. E. B. Du Bois has been bold enough to assert a connection between the spirit and spiritual world of African Americans and political struggle. Anticipating his critics, Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction* boldly considered freed people’s narratives of divine intervention in their emancipation and, in doing so, gave future historians insight into an aspect of African-American life that cannot be reduced to “culture”: “Foolish talk, all of this, you say, of course; and that is because no American now

<sup>28</sup> Odum, *Race and Rumors of Race*, 77–79; “Incidents Reported,” Sept. 1, 1941–Aug. 31, 1942, pp. 4, 8, box 10, Green Papers; “Report Involving Race Question,” Feb. 1943, pp. 2, 3, *ibid.*; “Report Involving Race Question,” Sept. 1943, p. 1, *ibid.* On Stagolee folklore and the political implications of “baaad niggers” for African Americans, see Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman*, 171–215; Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 407–19. “Report Involving Race Question,” March 1943, p. 3, box 10, Green Papers. See Julius Hudson, “The Hustling Ethic,” in *Rappin’ and Stylin’ Out: Communication in Urban Black America*, ed. Thomas Kochman (Urbana, 1972), 414–16; Kelley, “Riddle of the Zoot,” 167–72. For postwar examples, see Elliot Liebow, *Tally’s Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (Boston, 1967), 137–44; and Christina Milner and Richard Milner, *Black Players: The Secret World of Black Pimps* (New York, 1973).

<sup>29</sup> See Nell Irvin Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 347–51; Jane Maguire, *On Shares: Ed Brown’s Story* (New York, 1975), 125–33; Theodore Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York, 1974), 189, 192, 238–40.

believes in his religion. Its facts are mere symbolism; its revelation vague generalities; its ethics a matter of carefully balanced gain. But to most of the four million black folk emancipated by civil war, God was real. They knew Him. They had met Him personally in many a wild orgy of religious frenzy, or in the black stillness of the night."<sup>30</sup>

### At the Point of Production

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, as Herbert Gutman was poised to lead a revolution in the study of labor in the United States, George Rawick published an obscure article that warned against treating the history of working-class opposition as merely the history of trade unions or other formal labor organizations. If we are to locate working-class resistance, Rawick insisted, we need to know "how many man hours were lost to production because of strikes, the amount of equipment and material destroyed by industrial sabotage and deliberate negligence, the amount of time lost by absenteeism, the hours gained by workers through the slowdown, the limiting of the speed-up of the productive apparatus through the working class's own initiative." Unfortunately, few southern labor historians have followed Rawick's advice. Missing from most accounts of southern labor struggles are the ways unorganized working people resisted the conditions of work, tried to control the pace and amount of work, and carved out a modicum of dignity at the workplace.<sup>31</sup>

Not surprisingly, studies that seriously consider the sloppy, undetermined, everyday nature of workplace resistance have focused on workers who face considerable barriers to traditional trade union organization. Black domestic workers devised a whole array of creative strategies, including slowdowns, theft (or "pan-toting"), leaving work early, or quitting, in order to control the pace of work, increase wages, compensate for underpayment, reduce hours, and seize more personal autonomy. These individual acts often had a collective basis that remained hidden from their employers. Black women household workers in the urban South generally abided by a code of ethics or established a blacklist so they could collectively avoid employers who had proved unscrupulous, abusive, or unfair. In the factories, such strategies as feigning illness to get a day off, slowdowns, sometimes even sabotage often required the collective support of co-workers. Studies of black North Carolina

<sup>30</sup> See Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York, 1981). W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York, 1935), 124.

<sup>31</sup> George Rawick, "Working-Class Self-Activity," *Radical America*, 3 (March-April 1969), 145. For examples of the voluminous literature on black urban workers, organized labor, and working-class politics in the South, see Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923* (New York, 1991); Horace R. Cayton and George Mitchell, *Black Workers and the New Unions* (Chapel Hill, 1939); Philip Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1981* (New York, 1982); Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*; Korstad, "Daybreak of Freedom"; F. Ray Marshall, *Labor in the South* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967); Daniel Rosenberg, *New Orleans Dockworkers: Race, Labor, and Unionism, 1892-1923* (Albany, 1988); Richard Straw, "This Is Not a Strike, It Is Simply a Revolution": Birmingham Miners Struggle for Power, 1894-1908" (Ph.D. diss., University of Missouri, Columbia, 1980); Philip Taft, *Organizing Dixie: Alabama Workers in the Industrial Era*, ed. Gary Fink (Westport, 1981).



tobacco workers by Dolores Janiewski and Robert Korstad reveal a wide range of clandestine, yet collective strategies to control the pace of work or to strike out against employers. When black women stemmers had trouble keeping up with the pace, black men responsible for supplying tobacco to them would pack the baskets more loosely than usual. Among black women who operated stemmer machines, when one worker was ill, other women would take up the slack rather than call attention to her inability to handle her job, which could result in lost wages or dismissal.<sup>32</sup>

Theft at the workplace was a common form of working-class resistance, and yet the relationship between pilfering—whether of commodities or of time—and working-class opposition has escaped the attention of most historians of the African-American working class, except in slavery studies and the growing literature on domestic workers.<sup>33</sup> Any attempt to understand the relationship between theft and working-class opposition must begin by interrogating the dominant view of “theft” as deviant, criminal behavior. From the vantage point of workers, as several criminologists have pointed out, theft at the workplace is a strategy to recover unpaid wages or to compensate for low wages and mistreatment. Washerwomen in Atlanta and other southern cities, Hunter points out, occasionally kept their patrons’ clothes “as a weapon against individual employers who perpetuated injustices or more randomly against an oppressive employing class.” In the tobacco factories of North Carolina, black workers not only stole cigarettes and chewing tobacco (which they usually sold or bartered at the farmers’ market) but, in Durham at least, also figured out a way to rig the clock in order to steal time. In the coal mines of Birmingham and Appalachia, miners pilfered large chunks of coke and coal for their home ovens. Black workers sometimes turned to theft as a means of contesting the power public utilities had over their lives. During the Great Depression, for example, jobless and underemployed working people whose essential utilities had been turned off for nonpayment stole fuel, water, and electricity: They appropriated coal, drew free electricity by tapping power lines with copper wires, illegally turned on water mains, and destroyed vacant homes for firewood.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Hunter, “Household Workers in the Making,” 76–82; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 123–33; Dolores Janiewski, “Sisters under Their Skins: Southern Working Women, 1880–1950,” in *Sex, Race, and the Role of Women in the South*, ed. Joanne V. Hawks and Sheila L. Skemp (Jackson, 1983), 788; David Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York, 1978), 195–97; Korstad, “Daybreak of Freedom,” 101; Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied*, 98.

<sup>33</sup> On this form of resistance in the unfree working class, see especially Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 599–621; Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 241–44; Lichtenstein, “That Disposition to Theft, with which they have been Branded,” 413–40; Bauer and Bauer, “Day to Day Resistance to Slavery,” 388–419; Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 141–49; and Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth Century American South* (New York, 1984). The most sophisticated work on crime and resistance at the workplace continues to come from sociologists, radical criminologists, and historians of Europe and Africa. See, for example, Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1991); Hay et al., eds., *Albion’s Fatal Tree*; Jeff Crisp, *The Story of an African Working Class: Ghanaian Miners’ Struggles, 1870–1980* (London, 1984), 18, 26, 44–45, 68, 78; Bill Freund, “Theft and Social Protest among the Tin Miners of Northern Nigeria,” *Radical History Review*, 26 (Spring 1982), 68–86; Charles Van Onselen, *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900–1933* (London, 1976), 239–42; Charles Van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914: New Nineveh* (2 vols., New York, 1982), II, 171–95.

<sup>34</sup> On workplace theft, see Alvin Ward Gouldner, *Wildcat Strike* (Yellow Springs, 1954). On British workers, see Steven Box, *Recession, Crime, and Punishment* (Totowa, 1987), 34. Jason Ditton, *Part-Time Crime: An Ethnog-*

Unfortunately, we know very little about black workplace theft in the twentieth-century South and even less about its relationship to working-class opposition. Historians might begin to explore, for example, what Michel de Certeau calls “wiggling,” employees’ use of company time and materials for their own purposes (for example, repairing or making a toy for one’s child or writing love letters). By using part of the workday in this manner, workers not only take back precious hours from their employers but resist being totally subordinated to the needs of capital. The worker takes some of that labor power and spends it on herself or her family. One might imagine a domestic who seizes time from work to read books from her employer’s library. In a less creative, though more likely, scenario, washerwomen wash and iron their families’ clothes along with their employers’.<sup>35</sup>

A less elusive form of resistance is sabotage. Although the literature is nearly silent on industrial sabotage in the South, especially acts committed by black workers, it existed. Korstad’s study of tobacco workers in Winston-Salem introduces us to black labor organizer Robert Black, who admitted using sabotage to counter speedups:

These machines were more delicate, and all I had to do was feed them a little faster and overload it and the belts would break. When it split you had to run the tobacco in reverse to get it out, clean the whole machine out and then the mechanics would have to come and take all the broken links out of the belt. The machine would be down for two or three hours and I would end up running less tobacco than the old machines. We had to use all kind of techniques to protect ourselves and the other workers.

Historians provide ample evidence that domestic workers adopted sabotage techniques more frequently than industrial workers. There is evidence of household workers scorching or spitting in food, damaging kitchen utensils, and breaking household appliances, but employers and white contemporaries generally dismissed these acts as proof of black moral and intellectual inferiority. Testifying on the “servant problem” in the South, a frustrated employer remarked: “the washerwomen . . . badly damaged clothes they work on, iron-rusting them, tearing them, breaking off buttons, and burning them brown; and as for starch!—Colored cooks, too, generally abuse stoves, suffering them to get clogged with soot, and to ‘burn out’ in half the time they ought to last.”<sup>36</sup>

These examples are rare exceptions, however, for workplace theft and sabotage in the urban South has been all but ignored by labor historians. Given what we

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*raphy of Fiddling and Pilferage* (London, 1977); Richard C. Hollinger and J. P. Clark, *Theft by Employees* (Lexington, Mass., 1983). On the informal economy and working-class opposition, see Cyril Robinson, “Exploring the Informal Economy,” *Crime and Social Justice*, 15 (nos. 3 and 4, 1988), 3–16. Hunter, “Household Workers in the Making,” 82–83; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 132; Korstad, “Daybreak of Freedom,” 102; Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied*, 124; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 20–21; Julia Kirk Blackwelder, “Quiet Suffering: Atlanta Women in the 1930’s,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 61 (Summer 1977), 119–20.

<sup>35</sup> Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Rendall, 25–26.

<sup>36</sup> Korstad, “Daybreak of Freedom,” 101; Hunter, “Household Workers in the Making,” 85; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 131; John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New York, 1957), 108.



African-American stevedores in Houston, Texas, seizing a free moment for rest and relaxation. Photograph by Russell Lee.

*Courtesy Library of Congress.*

know of the pervasiveness of these strategies in other parts of the world and among slaves as well as rural African Americans in the postbellum period, the absence of accounts of similar clandestine activity by black industrial workers is surprising.<sup>37</sup> Part of the reason, I think, lies in southern labor historians' noble quest to redeem the black working class from racist stereotypes. In addition, company personnel records, police reports, mainstream white newspaper accounts, and correspondence have left us with a somewhat serene portrait of black folks who only occasionally deviate from what I like to call the "cult of true Sambohood." The safety and ideological security of the South required that pilfering, slowdowns, absenteeism, tool breaking, and other acts of black working-class resistance be turned into ineptitude, laziness, shiftlessness, and immorality. But rather than reinterpret these descriptions of black working-class behavior, sympathetic labor historians are often too quick to invert the images, remaking the black proletariat into the hardest working, thriftiest, most efficient labor force around. Historians too readily naturalize the Protestant work ethic and project onto black working people as a whole the ideologies of middle-class and prominent working-class blacks. But if we regard most work as alienating, especially work done amid racist and sexist oppression, then a crucial aspect of black working-class struggle is to minimize labor with as little economic loss as possible. Let us recall one of Du Bois's many beautiful passages from *Black Reconstruction*: "All observers spoke of the fact that the slaves were slow and churlish; that they wasted material and malingered at their work. Of course they did. This was not racial but economic. It was the answer of any group of laborers forced down to the last ditch. They might be made to work continuously but no power could make them work well."<sup>38</sup>

Traditional documents, if used imaginatively, can be especially useful for reconstructing the ways in which workers exploited racial stereotypes to control the pace

<sup>37</sup> European and African labor historians have been more inclined than Americanists to study industrial sabotage. See, for example, Pierre DuBois, *Sabotage in Industry* (New York, 1979); Tim Mason, "The Workers' Opposition in Nazi Germany," *History Workshop*, 11 (Spring 1981), 127–30; and Donald Quartaert, "Machine Breaking and the Changing Carpet Industry of Western Anatolia, 1860–1908," *Journal of Social History*, 19 (Summer 1986), 473–89. On black members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and whether they practiced sabotage, see David Roediger, "Labor, Gender and the 'Smothering' of Race: Covington Hall and the Complexities of Class," 1992 (in Kelley's possession); and James Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895–1943* (Baton Rouge, 1978), 219. Scholars have made little effort to explore the question, partly because black workers have been treated by most IWW historians more as objects to be debated over than as subjects engaged in "the class struggle." See especially Paul Brissenden, *The IWW: A Study of American Syndicalism* (New York, 1920), 208; John S. Gamba, *The Decline of the IWW* (New York, 1932), 135, 198; Selig Perlman and Philip Taft, *History of Labor in the United States* (New York, 1935), 247; Bernard A. Cook, "Covington Hall and Radical Rural Unionization in Louisiana," *Louisiana History*, 18 (no. 2, 1977), 230, 235; Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the IWW* (New York, 1969), 8–9, 210, 213–16; Merl E. Reed, "Lumberjacks and Longshoremen: The IWW in Louisiana," *Labor History*, 13 (Winter 1972), 44–58; Philip Foner, "The IWW and the Black Worker," *Journal of Negro History*, 55 (Jan. 1970), 45–64; and Sterling Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (New York, 1931), esp. 329–35.

<sup>38</sup> My thinking is partly inspired by Sylvia Wynter, "Sambos and Minstrels," *Social Text*, 1 (Winter 1979), 149–56. On the dominant assumptions about black criminality and laziness in the postbellum South, see George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (1971; Middletown, 1987), 251–52, 273–75, 287–88; Claude H. Nolen, *The Negro's Image in the South: The Anatomy of White Supremacy* (Lexington, Ky., 1967), 13–15, 25–27; and Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 176–77. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 40.

of work. Materials that describe “unreliable,” “shiftless,” or “ignorant” black workers should be read as more than vicious, racist commentary on African Americans; in many instances these descriptions are employers’, foremen’s, and managers’ social reconstruction of the meaning of working-class self-activity, which they not only misunderstood but were never supposed to understand. Fortunately, many southern black workers understood the cult of true Sambohood all too well, and at times they used the contradictions of racist ideology to their advantage. In certain circumstances, their inefficiency and penchant for not following directions created havoc and chaos for industrial production or the smooth running of a household. And all the while the appropriate grins, shuffles, and “yassums” served to mitigate potential punishment.<sup>39</sup>

Among workers especially, the racial stereotypes associated with industrial disruption were also gendered. As David Roediger has demonstrated in a penetrating essay, Covington Hall and the Brotherhood of Timber Workers (BTW) in Louisiana understood sabotage as a direct, militant confrontation with the lumber companies rather than an evasive strategy. As a native southern white leader of the working class, born of privilege, Hall sought to use appeals to “manhood” to build biracial unity. His highly gendered rhetoric, which insisted that there were no “Niggers” or “white trash”—only MEN—had the effect of turning clandestine tactics into direct confrontation. Roediger writes, “it is hard to believe the zeal with which [sabotage] was propagandized was not intensified by the tremendous emphasis on manhood, in part as a way to disarm race, in BTW thinking. . . . Hall’s publications came to identify sabotage with the improbable image of the rattlesnake, not the black cat symbolizing the tactic elsewhere.”<sup>40</sup>

Yet, despite Hall’s efforts, employers and probably most workers continued to view what black male workers in the lumber industry were doing as less than manly—indeed, as proof of their inferiority at the workplace and evidence that they should be denied upward mobility and higher wages. Thus, for some black male industrial workers, efficiency and the work ethic were sometimes more effective as signifiers of manliness than sabotage and foot dragging. As Joe Trotter’s powerful new book on African Americans in southern West Virginia reminds us, theft, sabotage, and slowdowns were two-edged weapons that, more often than not, reinforced the subordinate position of black coal miners in a racially determined occupational hierarchy. As he explains, “Job performance emerged as one of the black miners’ most telling survival mechanisms. To secure their jobs, they resolved to provide cooperative, efficient, and productive labor.” Their efficient labor was a logical response to a rather limited struggle for job security and advancement since their subordination to specific tasks and pay scales were based, at least ostensibly, on race

<sup>39</sup> Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 101–3; Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 23–36. The mask of ignorance did not always work as a strategy to mitigate punishment. Some rural African Americans accused of stealing livestock or burning barns were lynched. See clippings in Ralph Ginzburg, ed., *100 Years of Lynchings* (New York, 1962), 92–93.

<sup>40</sup> Roediger, “Labor, Gender, and the ‘Smothering’ of Race,” 34.

alone. More than a few black workers seemed to believe that a solid work record would eventually topple the racial ceiling on occupational mobility. Obviously, efficiency did not always lead to improved work conditions, nor did sabotage and foot dragging always go unnoticed or unpunished. What we need to know is why certain occupations seemed more conducive to particular strategies. Was efficiency more prevalent in industries where active, interracial trade unions at least occasionally challenged racially determined occupational ceilings (for example, coal mining)? Did extensive workplace surveillance deter sabotage and theft? Were black workers less inclined toward sabotage when disruptions made working conditions more difficult or dangerous for fellow employees? Were evasive strategies more common in service occupations? These questions need to be explored in greater detail. They suggest, as British labor historian Richard Price has maintained, that to understand strategies of resistance thoroughly we need to explore with greater specificity the character of subordination at the workplace.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, the relative absence of resistance at the point of production does not mean that workers acquiesced or accommodated to the conditions of work. On the contrary, the most pervasive form of black protest was simply to leave. Central to black working-class infrapolitics was mobility, for it afforded workers relative freedom to escape oppressive living and working conditions and power to negotiate better working conditions. Of course, one could argue that in the competitive context of industrial capitalism—North and South—some companies clearly benefited from such migration since wages for blacks remained comparatively low no matter where black workers ended up. But the very magnitude of working-class mobility weakens any thesis that southern black working-class politics was characterized by accommodationist thinking. Besides, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that a significant portion of black migrants, especially black emigrants to Africa and the Caribbean, were motivated by a desire to vote, to provide a better education for their children, or to live in a setting in which Africans or African Americans exercised power. The ability to move represented a crucial step toward empowerment and self-determination; employers and landlords understood this, which explains why so much energy was expended limiting labor mobility and redefining migration as “shiftlessness,” “indolence,” or a childlike penchant to wander.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 65, 108, 264–65; Richard Price, “The Labour Process and Labour History,” *Social History*, 8 (Jan. 1983), 62–63.

<sup>42</sup> See Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 68–85, 109; William Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern Quest for Racial Control* (Baton Rouge, 1991); Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*, 30–32, 168; James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago, 1989); Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York, 1976); Edwin S. Redkey, *Black Exodus: Black Nationalist and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890–1910* (New Haven, 1969); and Joe W. Trotter, ed., *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* (Bloomington, 1991). For examples of the ways in which black migration is redefined, see Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America's Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present* (New York, 1992), 104–26; Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, 115–19; and Nolen, *Negro's Image in the South*, 186–88.

## Gender, Race, Work, and the Politics of Location

Location plays a critical role in shaping workplace resistance, identity, and—broadly speaking—infrapolitics. By location I mean the racialized and gendered social spaces of work and community, as well as black workers' position in the hierarchy of power, the ensemble of social relations. Southern labor historians and race relations scholars have established the degree to which occupations and, in some cases, work spaces were segregated by race. But only recently has scholarship begun to move beyond staid discussions of such labor market segmentation and inequality to an analysis of how spatial and occupational distinctions helped create an oppositional consciousness and collective action. Feminist scholarship on the South and some community histories have begun to examine how the social spaces in which people work (in addition to the world beyond work, which was also divided by race and, at times, sex) shaped the character of everyday resistance, collective action, and domination.<sup>43</sup>

Earl Lewis offers a poignant example of how the racialized social locations of work and community formed black working-class consciousness and oppositional strategies. During World War I, the all-black Transport Workers Association (TWA) of Norfolk, Virginia, began organizing African-American waterfront workers irrespective of skill. Soon thereafter, its leaders turned their attention to the ambitious task of organizing all black workers, most notably cigar stemmers, oyster shuckers, and domestics. The TWA resembled what might have happened if Garveyites had taken control of an Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) local: The ultimate goal seemed to be One Big Negro Union. What is important about the Norfolk story is the startling success of the TWA's efforts, particularly among workers who have been deemed unorganizable. Lewis is not satisfied with such simplistic explanations as the power of charismatic leadership or the primacy of race over class to account for the mass support for the TWA; rather, he makes it quite clear that the labor process, work spaces, intraclass power relations, communities and neighborhoods—indeed, class struggle itself—were all racialized. The result, therefore, was a “racialized” class consciousness. “In the world in which these workers lived,” Lewis writes, “nearly

<sup>43</sup> For rich descriptions of racially segregated work, one could go back as far as Charles Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States, 1850–1925* (New York, 1927); Carter G. Woodson and Lorenzo Greene, *The Negro Wage Earner* (New York, 1930); and Spero and Harris, *Black Worker*. For sophisticated recent studies of the racialized dimension of industrial work and work spaces, see Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*; Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, esp. 65–88, 102–11, 106. Feminist historians of southern labor have shown sensitivity to the relationship between work and collective consciousness. See especially Hunter, “Household Workers in the Making”; Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied*; Janiewski, “Sisters under Their Skins,” 13–35; Janiewski, “Seeking ‘a New Day and a New Way’: Black Women and Unions in the Southern Tobacco Industry,” in *To Toil the Livelong Day: American Women at Work, 1780–1980*, ed. Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton (Ithaca, 1987), 161–78; Korstad, “‘Day-break of Freedom’”; Julia Kirk Blackwelder, “Women in the Workforce: Atlanta, New Orleans, and San Antonio, 1930–1940,” *Journal of Urban History*, 4 (May 1978), 331–58. My ideas about a “politics of location” are derived from Adrienne Rich, “Notes toward a Politics of Location,” in *Women, Feminist Identity, and Society in the 1980's*, ed. Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz and Iris M. Zavala (Philadelphia, 1985), 7–22; and Nina Gregg, “Women Telling Stories about Reality: Subjectivity, the Generation of Meaning, and the Organizing of a Union at Yale” (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 1991).

everyone was black, except for a supervisor or employer. Even white workers who may have shared a similar class position enjoyed a superior social position because of their race. Thus, although it appears that some black workers manifested a semblance of worker consciousness, that consciousness was so imbedded in the perspective of race that neither blacks nor whites saw themselves as equal partners in the same labor movement."<sup>44</sup>

A racialized class consciousness shaped black workers' relations with interracial trade unions as well. Black workers did not always resist segregated union locals (although black union leaders often did). Indeed, in some instances African-American workers preferred segregated locals—if they maintained control over their own finances and played a leading role in the larger decision-making process. To cite one example, black members of the Brotherhood of Timber Workers in Louisiana, an IWW affiliate, found the idea of separate locals quite acceptable. However, at the 1912 BTW convention black delegates complained that they could not “suppress a feeling of taxation without representation” since their dues were in the control of whites, and demanded a “coloured executive board, elected by black union members and designed to work ‘in harmony with its white counterpart.’”<sup>45</sup>

Although gender undoubtedly shaped the experiences, work spaces, and collective consciousness of all southern black workers, historians of women have been the most forthright and consistent in employing gender as an analytical category. Recent work on black female tobacco workers, in particular, has opened up important lines of inquiry. Not only were the dirty and difficult tasks of sorting and stemming tobacco relegated to black women, but those women had to do the tasks in spaces that were unbearably hot, dry, dark, and poorly ventilated. The coughing and wheezing, the tragically common cases of workers succumbing to tuberculosis, the endless speculation as to the cause of miscarriages among co-workers, were constant reminders that these black women spent more than a third of the day toiling in a health hazard. If some compared their work space to a prison or a dungeon, then they could not help but notice that all of the inmates were black women like themselves. Moreover, foremen referred to them only by their first names or changed their names to “girl” or something more profane and regarded their bodies as perpetual motion machines as well as sexual objects. Thus bonds of gender as well as race were reinforced by the common experience of sexual harassment. Recalled one Reynolds worker, “I’ve seen [foremen] just walk up and pat women on their fannies and they’d better not say anything.” Women, unlike their black male co-workers, had to devise a whole range of strategies to resist or mitigate the daily physical and verbal abuse of their bodies, ranging from putting forth an “asexual” persona to posturing as a “crazy” person to simply quitting. Although these acts seem individualized and

<sup>44</sup> Lewis, *In Their Own Interests*, 47–58, esp. 58. See also McCallum, “Songs of Work and Songs of Worship,” 14.

<sup>45</sup> James R. Green, “The Brotherhood of Timber Workers: 1910–1913: A Radical Response to Industrial Capitalism in the Southern U.S.A.,” *Past and Present*, 60 (Aug. 1973), 185. On the preference of black workers for segregated locals, see Bruce Nelson, “Class and Race in the Crescent City: The ILWU, from San Francisco to New Orleans,” in *The CIO’s Left-led Unions*, ed. Steven Rosswurm (New Brunswick, 1992), 19–45.



isolated, the experience of, and opposition to, sexual exploitation probably reinforced bonds of solidarity. In the tobacco factories, these confrontations usually took place in a collective setting, the advances of lecherous foremen were discussed among the women, and strategies to deal with sexual assault were observed, learned from other workplaces, or passed down. (Former domestics, for example, had experience staving off the sexual advances of male employers.) Yet, to most male union leaders, such battles were private affairs that had no place among "important" collective bargaining issues. Unfortunately, most labor historians have accepted this view, unable to see resistance to sexual harassment as a primary struggle to transform everyday conditions at the workplace. Nevertheless, out of this common social space and experience of racism and sexual exploitation, black female tobacco workers constructed "networks of solidarity." They referred to each other as "sisters," shared the same neighborhoods and community institutions, attended the same churches, and displayed a deep sense of mutuality by collecting money for co-workers during sickness and death and celebrating each other's birthdays. In fact, those networks of solidarity were indispensable for organizing tobacco plants in Winston-Salem and elsewhere.<sup>46</sup>

In rethinking workplace struggles, black women's work culture, and the politics of location, we must be careful not to assume that home and work were distinct. While much of this scholarship and the ideas I am proposing directly challenge the "separate spheres" formulation, there is an implicit assumption that working-class households are separate from spaces in which wage labor takes place. Recent studies of paid homework remind us that working women's homes were often extensions of the factory. For African-American women, in particular, Eileen Boris and Tera Hunter demonstrate that the decision to do piecework or to take in laundry grows out of a struggle for greater control over the labor process, out of a conscious effort to avoid workplace environments in which black women have historically confronted sexual harassment, and out of "the patriarchal desires of men to care for their women even when they barely could meet economic needs of their families or from women's own desires to care for their children under circumstances that demanded that they contribute to the family economy."<sup>47</sup> The study of homework opens up numerous

<sup>46</sup> Korstad, "'Daybreak of Freedom,'" 90–91, esp. 94; Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied*, 97–109 *passim*; Janiewski, "Sisters under Their Skins," 27–28; Janiewski, "Seeking 'a New Day and a New Way,'" 166; Beverly W. Jones, "Race, Sex, and Class: Black Female Tobacco Workers in Durham, North Carolina, 1920–1940, and the Development of Female Consciousness," *Feminist Studies*, 10 (Fall 1984), 443–50; Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 137–38. On sexual exploitation of domestic workers, see Hunter, "Household Workers in the Making," 116–17; and Kuhn, Joye, and West, *Living Atlanta*, 115. Works of labor history that attend to harassment are Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930–1950* (Albuquerque, 1987); and Mary Bularzik, "Sexual Harassment at the Workplace: Historical Notes," in *Workers' Struggles, Past and Present: A "Radical America" Reader*, ed. James Green (Philadelphia, 1983), 117–35. And see Elsa Barkley Brown, "'What Has Happened Here': The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics," *Feminist Studies*, 18 (Summer 1992), 302–7. Jones, "Race, Sex, and Class," 449; Korstad, "'Daybreak of Freedom.'"

<sup>47</sup> Eileen Boris, "Black Women and Paid Labor in the Home: Industrial Homework in Chicago in the 1920's," in *Homework: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Paid Labor at Home*, ed. Eileen Boris and Cynthia R. Daniels (Urbana, 1989), 47; Hunter, "Household Workers in the Making," 151–86. See also Eileen Boris, *In Defense of Motherhood: The Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States* (Cambridge, Eng., forthcoming).

possibilities for rethinking black working-class opposition in the twentieth century. How do homeworkers resist unsatisfactory working conditions? How do they organize? Do community- and neighborhood-based organizations protect their interest as laborers? How does the extension of capital-labor relations into the home affect the use and meaning of household space, labor patterns, and the physical and psychological well-being of the worker and her family? How does the presumably isolated character of their work shape their consciousness? How critical is female homework as a survival strategy for households in which male wage earners are involved in strikes or other industrial conflicts? Thanks to the work of Boris and Hunter, many of these questions have been explored with regard to northern urban working women and southern laundry workers. But aside from washerwomen and occasional seamstresses, what do we really know about black homeworkers in the Jim Crow South?

For many African-American women homework was a way to avoid the indignities of household service, for as the experience of black tobacco workers suggests, much workplace resistance centered around issues of dignity, respect, and autonomy. White employers often required black domestics to don uniforms, which reduced them to their identities as employees and ultimately signified ownership—black workers literally became the property of whoever owned the uniform. As Elizabeth Clark-Lewis points out, household workers in Washington, D.C., resisted wearing uniforms because they were symbols of live-in service. Their insistence on wearing their own clothes was linked to a broader struggle to change the terms of employment from those of a “servant” (that is, a live-in maid) to those of a day worker. “As servants in uniform,” Clark-Lewis writes, “the women felt, they took on the identity of the job—and the uniform seemed to assume a life of its own, separate from the person wearing it, beyond her control. As day workers, wearing their own clothes symbolized their new view of life as a series of personal choices rather than predetermined imperatives.”<sup>48</sup>

But struggles for dignity and autonomy often pitted workers against other workers. Black workers endured some of the most obnoxious verbal and physical insults from white workers, their supposed “natural allies.” We are well aware of dramatic moments of white working-class violence—the armed attacks on Georgia’s black railroad firemen in 1909, the lynching of a black strikebreaker in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1921, the racial pogroms in the shipyards of Mobile, Alabama, during World War II, to mention only three—but these were merely explosive, large-scale manifestations of the verbal and physical violence black workers experienced on a daily basis. Without compunction, racist whites in many of the South’s mines, mills, factories and docks referred to their darker co-workers as “boy,” “girl,” “uncle,” “aunt,” and more commonly, just plain “nigger.” Memphis United Auto Workers (UAW) organizer Clarence Coe recalls, “I have seen the time when a young white boy came in and maybe I had been working at the plant longer than he had been

<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, “‘This Work Had a End’: African-American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1910–1940,” in *To Toil the Livelong Day*, ed. Groneman and Norton, 207.

living, but if he was white I had to tell him 'yes sir' or 'no sir.' That was degrading as hell [but] I had to live with it." Occasionally white workers kicked and slapped black workers just for fun or out of frustration. Without institutional structures to censure white workers for racist and sexist attacks, black workers took whatever opportunity they could to contest white insults and reaffirm their dignity, their indignation often exploding into fisticuffs at the workplace or after work. Black tobacco worker Charlie Decoda recalled working "with a cracker and they loved to put their foot in your tail and laugh. I told him once, 'You put your foot in my tail again ever and I'll break your leg.'" Even sabotage, a strategy usually employed against capital, was occasionally used in the most gruesome and reactionary intraclass conflicts. Michael Honey tells of George Holloway, a black UAW leader in Memphis, Tennessee, whose attempts to desegregate his local and make it more responsive to black workers' needs prompted white union members to tamper with his punch press. According to Honey, the sabotage "could have killed him if he had not examined his machine before turning it on." But as Honey also points out, personal indignities and individual acts of racist violence prompted black workers to take collective action, sometimes with the support of antiracist white workers. Black auto workers in Memphis, for example, staged a wildcat strike after a plant guard punched a black woman in the mouth.<sup>49</sup>

Intraclass conflict was not merely a manifestation of false consciousness or a case of companies' fostering an unwritten policy of divide and rule. Rather, white working-class consciousness was also racialized. The construction of a white working-class racial identity, as has been illustrated in the works of Alexander Saxton, David Roediger, and Eric Lott, registered the peculiar nature of class conflict where wage labor under capitalism and chattel slavery existed side by side. That work is especially important, for it maps the history of how Euro-American workers came to see themselves as white and to manifest that identity politically and culturally. What whiteness and blackness signified for antebellum white workers need not concern us here. We need to acknowledge, however, that while racism was not always in the interests of southern white workers, it was nonetheless a very "real" aspect of white working-class consciousness. Racist attacks by white workers did not need instigation from wily employers. Because they ultimately defined their own class interests in racial terms, white workers employed racist terror and intimidation to help secure a comparatively privileged position within the prevailing system of wage dependency, as well as what Du Bois and Roediger call a "psychological wage." A sense of superiority and security was gained by being white and *not* being black. White workers sometimes obtained very real material benefits by institutionalizing their

<sup>49</sup> John Michael Matthews, "The Georgia Race Strike of 1909," *Journal of Southern History*, 40 (Nov. 1974), 613–30; Hugh Hammet, "Labor and Race: The Georgia Railroad Strike of 1909," *Labor History*, 16 (Fall 1975), 470–84; Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker*, 105–7; Ginzburg, ed., *100 Years of Lynching*, 157–58; William H. Harris, *The Harder We Run: Black Workers since the Civil War* (New York, 1982), 45–47; Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response*, 338–39; Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied*, 121; Michael Honey, "Black Workers Remember: Industrial Unionism in the Era of Jim Crow," paper presented to the Southern Labor History Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, Oct. 9–12, 1991, pp. 13, 16, 18 (in Kelley's possession).

strength through white-controlled unions that used their power to enforce ceilings on black mobility and wages. The limited privileges afforded white workers as whites meant a subordinate status for African-American workers. Hence even the division of labor was racialized — black workers had to perform “nigger work.” And without the existence of “nigger work” and “nigger labor,” whiteness to white workers would be meaningless.<sup>50</sup>

Determining the social and political character of “nigger work” is therefore essential to understanding black working-class infrapolitics. First, by racializing the division of labor, it has the effect of turning dirty, physically difficult, and potentially dangerous work into humiliating work. To illustrate this point, we might examine how the meaning of tasks once relegated to black workers changed when they were done predominantly, if not exclusively, by whites. Among contemporary coal miners in Appalachia, where there are few black workers and racial ceilings have been largely (though not entirely) removed, difficult and dangerous tasks are charged with masculinity. Michael Yarrow found the miners believed that “being able to do hard work, to endure discomfort, and to brave danger” is an achievement of “manliness.” While undeniably an important component of the miner’s work culture, “the masculine meaning given to hard, dangerous work [obscures] its reality as class exploitation.” On the other hand, the black miners in Trotter’s study were far more judicious, choosing to leave a job rather than place themselves in undue danger. Those black miners took pride in their work; they often challenged dominant categories of skill and performed what had been designated as menial labor with the pride of skilled craftsmen. But once derogatory social meaning is inscribed upon the work (let alone the black bodies that perform the work), it undermines its potential dignity and worth — frequently rendering “nigger work” less manly.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, because black men and women toiled in work spaces in which both bosses and white workers demanded deference, freely hurled insults and epithets at them, and occasionally brutalized their bodies, issues of dignity informed much of black infrapolitics in the urban South. Interracial conflicts between workers were not simply diversions from some idealized definition of class struggle; white working-class racism was sometimes as much a barrier to black workers’ struggle for dignity

<sup>50</sup> David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991), 13–14; Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1990); Eric Lott, “‘The Seeming Counterfeit’: Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy,” *American Quarterly*, 43 (June 1991), 223–54; Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*, 121–31; Herbert Hill, “Myth-Making as Labor History: Herbert Gutman and the United Mine Workers of America,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, Society*, 2 (Winter 1988), 132–200; Robert J. Norrell, “Caste in Steel: Jim Crow Careers in Birmingham, Alabama,” *Journal of American History*, 73 (Dec. 1986), 669–94; Horace Huntley, “Iron Ore Miners and Mine Mill in Alabama, 1933–1952” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1976), 110–69; Honey, “Black Workers Remember,” 15; Roediger, “Labor in the White Skin,” 287–308; Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 43–87 *passim*.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Yarrow, “The Gender-Specific Class Consciousness of Appalachian Coal Miners: Structure and Change,” in *Bringing Class Back In: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Scott G. McNall, Rhonda F. Levine, and Rick Fantasia (Boulder, 1991), 302–3; Trotter, *Coal, Class, and Color*, 109; Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York, 1981), 133. See also Paul Willis, “Shop-Floor Culture, Masculinity, and the Wage Form,” in *Working-Class Culture*, ed. John Clarke, Charles Critcher, and Richard Johnson (New York, 1979), 185–98.

and autonomy at the workplace as the racial division of labor imposed by employers. Thus episodes of interracial solidarity among working people and the fairly consistent opposition by most black labor leaders to Jim Crow locals are all the more remarkable. More important, for our purposes at least, the normative character of interracial conflict opens up another way to think about the function of public and hidden transcripts for *white* workers. For southern white workers openly to express solidarity with African Americans was a direct challenge to the public transcript of racial difference and domination. Indeed, throughout this period, leaders of southern biracial unions, with the exception of some left-wing organizers, tended to apologize for their actions, insisting that the union was driven by economic necessity or assuring the public of their opposition to “social equality” or “intermixing.” Thus, even the hint of intimate, close relations between workers across the color line had consequences that cut both ways. Except for radicals and other bold individuals willing to accept ostracism, ridicule, and even violence, expressions of friendship and respect for African Americans had to remain part of the “hidden transcript” of white workers. White workers had to disguise and choke back acts and gestures of antiracism; when white workers were exposed as “nigger lovers” or when they took public stands on behalf of African Americans, the consequences could be fatal.<sup>52</sup>

### On Buses, Streetcars, and City Streets

African-American workers' struggle for dignity did not end at the workplace. For most white workers public space—after intense class struggle—eventually became a “democratic space,” where people of different class backgrounds shared city theaters, public conveyances, streets, and parks. For black people, white-dominated public space was vigilantly undemocratic and potentially dangerous. Jim Crow signs, filthy and inoperable public toilets, white police officers, dark bodies standing in the aisles of half-empty buses, black pedestrians stepping off the sidewalk or walking with their eyes turned down or away, and other acts of interracial social “etiquette”—all reminded black people every day of their second-class citizenship. The sights, sounds, and experiences of African Americans in white-dominated public spaces challenge the notion that southern black working-class politics can be understood by merely examining labor organization, workplace resistance, culture, and the family.

While historians of the civil rights movement have exhaustively documented the organized movement to desegregate the South, the study of unorganized, day-to-day resistance to segregated public space remains undeveloped. We know very little

<sup>52</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 113. On biracial unions in the South, a subject that deserves greater examination, see Eric Arnesen, “Following the Color Line of Labor: Black Workers and the Labor Movement before 1930,” *Radical History Review*, 55 (Winter 1993), 53–87. See also Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*; and Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights*. Numerous white radicals and sympathizers in Alabama were severely beaten (and one lynched) for taking unpopular stands on African-American rights. That they crossed the color line was far more important than that they were Communists; Communists in north Alabama, where the party was completely white and included ex-Klan members, faced virtually no violence until they began

about the everyday posing, discursive conflicts, and small-scale skirmishes that not only created the conditions for the success of organized, collective movements but also shaped segregation policies, policing, and punishment.<sup>33</sup> By broadening our focus to include the daily confrontations and blatant acts of resistance—in other words, the realm of infrapolitics—we will find that black passengers, particularly working people, were concerned with much more than legalized segregation. A cursory examination of black working-class resistance on Birmingham buses and streetcars during World War II reveals that in most incidents the racial compartmentalization of existing space was not the primary issue. Rather, the most intense battles were fought over the deliberate humiliation of African Americans by operators and other passengers; shortchanging; the power of drivers to allocate or limit space for black passengers; and the practice of forcing blacks to pay at the front door and enter through the center doors. For example, half-empty buses or streetcars often passed up African Americans on the pretext of preserving space for potential white riders. It was not unusual for a black passenger who had paid at the front of the bus to be left standing while she or he attempted to board at the center door.

The design and function of buses and streetcars rendered them unique sites of contest. An especially useful metaphor for understanding the character of domination and resistance on public transportation might be to view the interior spaces as “moving theaters.” Here I am using the word *theater* in two ways: as a site of performance and a site of military conflict. First, plays of conflict, repression, and resistance are performed in which passengers witness, or participate in, “skirmishes” that shape the collective memory of the passengers, illustrate the limits as well as the possibilities of resistance to domination, and draw more passengers into the “performance.” The design of streetcars and buses—enclosed spaces with seats facing forward or toward the center aisle—gave everyday discursive and physical confrontations a dramaturgical quality. Second, theater as a military metaphor is particularly appropriate because all bus drivers and streetcar conductors in Birmingham carried guns and blackjacks and used them pretty regularly to maintain (the social) order. In August 1943, for example, when a black woman riding the South East Lake–Ensley line complained to the conductor that he had passed her stop, he followed her out of the streetcar and, in the words of the official report, “knocked her down with handle of gun. No further trouble.” Violence was not a completely effective

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organizing black sharecroppers in the black belt counties. See Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 47, 67–74, 130–31, 159–75 *passim*.

<sup>33</sup> On early organized struggles against Jim Crow public transportation, see August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, “The Boycott Movement against Jim Crow Streetcars in the South, 1900–1906,” in *Along the Color Line: Explorations in the Black Experience*, ed. August Meier and Elliot Rudwick (Urbana, 1976), 267–89; and Roger A. Fischer, “A Pioneer Protest: The New Orleans Street-Car Controversy of 1867,” *Journal of Negro History*, 53 (July 1968), 219–33. A few scholars briefly mention isolated incidents of day-to-day conflict on public transportation in the South. See Pete Daniel, “Going among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II,” *Journal of American History*, 77 (Dec. 1990), 906; Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era*, 16–19; Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied*, 141; James A. Burran, “Urban Racial Violence in the South during World War II: A Comparative Overview,” in *From the Old South to the New: Essays on the Transitional South*, ed. Walter J. Fraser, Jr., and Winfred B. Moore, Jr. (Westport, 1981), 171; Kuhn, Joye, and West, *Living Atlanta*, 77–82.

deterrent, however. In the twelve months beginning September 1941, there were at least 88 cases of blacks occupying "white" space on public transportation, 55 of which were open acts of defiance in which African-American passengers either refused to give up their seats or sat in the white section. But this is only part of the story; reported incidents and complaints of racial conflict totaled 176. These cases included at least 18 interracial fights among passengers, 22 fights between black passengers and operators, and 13 incidents in which black passengers engaged in verbal or physical confrontations over being shortchanged.<sup>54</sup>

Public transportation, unlike any other form of public space (for example, a waiting room or a water fountain), was an extension of the marketplace. Because transportation companies depend on profit, any action that might limit potential fares was economically detrimental. This explains why divisions between black and white space had to be relatively fluid and flexible. With no fixed dividing line, black and white riders continually contested readjustments that affected them. The fluidity of the color line meant that their protestations often fell within the proscribed boundaries of segregationist law, thus rendering public transportation especially vulnerable to everyday acts of resistance. Furthermore, for African Americans, public transportation — as an extension of the marketplace — was also a source of economic conflict. One source of frustration was the all too common cheating or shortchanging of black passengers. Unlike the workplace, where workers entered as disempowered producers dependent on wages for survival and beholden, ostensibly at least, to their superiors, public transportation gave passengers a sense of consumer entitlement. The notion that blacks and whites should pay the same for "separate but equal" facilities fell within the legal constraints of Jim Crow, although for black passengers to argue publicly with whites, especially those in positions of authority, fell outside the limits of acceptable behavior. When a College Hills line passenger thought she had been shortchanged, she initially approached the driver in a very civil manner but was quickly brushed off and told to take her seat. In the words of the official report, "She came up later and began cursing and could not be stopped and a white passenger came and knocked her down. Officer was called and made her show him the money which was .25 short, then asked her where the rest of the money was. She looked in her purse and produced the other quarter. She was taken to jail." The incident served as compelling theater, a performance that revealed the hidden transcript, the power of Jim Crow to crush public declarations swiftly and decisively, the role of white passengers as defenders of segregation, the degree to which white men — not even law enforcement officers — could assault black

<sup>54</sup> "Report Involving Race Question," Aug. 1943, p. 1, box 10, Green Papers. For other examples, see "Race Complaints for Last Twelve Months," *ibid.*; and "Incidents Reported," Sept. 1, 1941, to Aug. 31, 1942, *ibid.*; and James Armstrong interview by Cliff Kuhn, July 16, 1984, p. 9, Working Lives Oral History Collection (University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa). "Race Complaints for Last Twelve Months," Sept. 1, 1941, to Aug. 31, 1942, box 10, Green Papers; "Incidents Reported," Sept. 1, 1941, to Aug. 31, 1942, *ibid.*; "Analysis of Complaints and Incidents Concerning Race Problems on Birmingham Electric Company's Transportation System, 12 Months Ending August 31, 1942," *ibid.*

women without compunction. The play closes with the woman utterly humiliated, for all along, the report claims, she had miscounted her change.<sup>55</sup>

Although the available records are incomplete, it seems that black women outnumbered black men in incidents of resistance on buses and streetcars. In 1941–1942, nearly twice as many black women were arrested as black men, most of them charged with either sitting in the white section or cursing. Indeed, there is a long tradition of militant opposition to Jim Crow public transportation by black women, a tradition that includes such celebrated figures as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells-Barnett and, of course, Rosa Parks.<sup>56</sup> More significantly, however, black working women in Birmingham generally rode public transportation more often than men. Male industrial workers tended to live in industrial suburbs within walking distance of their places of employment, while most black working women were domestics who had to travel to relatively wealthy and middle-class white neighborhoods on the other side of town.

Unlike the popular image of Parks's quiet resistance, most black women's opposition tended to be profane and militant. There were literally dozens of episodes of black women sitting in the white section, arguing with drivers or conductors, and fighting with white passengers. The "drama" usually ended with the woman being ejected, receiving a refund for her fare and leaving on her own accord, moving to the back of the vehicle, or being hauled off to jail. Indeed, throughout the war, dozens of black women were arrested for merely cursing at the operator or a white passenger. In October of 1943, for example, a teenager named Pauline Carth attempted to board the College Hills line around 8:00 P.M. When she was informed that there was no more room for colored passengers, she forced her way into the bus, threw her money at the driver, and cursed and spit on him. The driver responded by knocking her out of the bus, throwing her to the ground, and holding her down until police arrived. Fights between black women and white passengers were also fairly common. In March of 1943, a black woman and a white man boarding the East Lake–West End line apparently got into a shoving match, which angered the black woman to the point where she "cursed him all the way to Woodlawn." When they reached Woodlawn she was arrested, sentenced to thirty days in jail, and fined fifty dollars.<sup>57</sup>

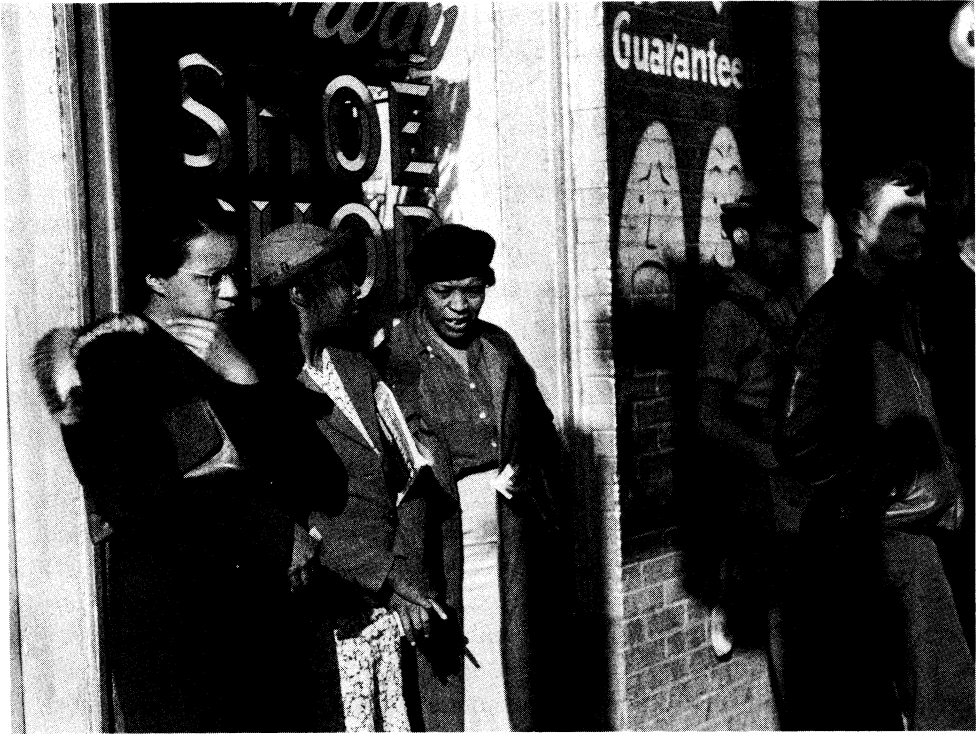
Although black women's actions were as violent or profane as men's, gender differences in power relations and occupation did shape black women's resistance. Household workers were in a unique position to contest racist practices on public transportation without significantly transgressing Jim Crow laws or social etiquette.

<sup>55</sup> "Reports Involving Race Question," March 1943, pp. 4–5, box 10, Green Papers; "Reports Involving Race Question," Nov. 1943, p. 2, *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> "Race Complaints for Last Twelve Months," Sept. 1, 1941, to Aug. 31, 1942, *ibid.*; Willi Coleman, "Black Women and Segregated Public Transportation: Ninety Years of Resistance," in *Black Women in United States History*, ed. Darlene Cook Hine (16 vols., Brooklyn, 1989), V, 295–301; Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825–1880* (Baltimore, 1990), 93–94.

<sup>57</sup> "Race Complaints for Last Twelve Months," Sept. 1, 1941, to Aug. 31, 1942, p. 1, box 10, Green Papers; "Reports Involving Race Question," Oct. 1943, p. 4, *ibid.*; *Birmingham World*, Oct. 29, 1943; "Reports Involving Race Question," March 1943, p. 4, box 10, Green Papers.





African-American household workers waiting for a streetcar in downtown Atlanta, Georgia, 1939. Photograph by Marion Post Wolcott.  
*Courtesy Library of Congress.*

First, transit company rules permitted domestics traveling with their white employers' children to sit in the section designated for whites. The idea, of course, was to spare white children from having to endure the Negro section. Although this was the official policy of the Birmingham Electric Company (owner of the city transit system), drivers and conductors did not always follow it. The rule enabled black women to challenge the indignity of being forced to move or stand while seats were available because their retaining or taking seats was sometimes permissible under Jim Crow. Second, employers intervened on behalf of their domestics, which had the effect of redirecting black protest into legitimate, "acceptable" avenues. Soon after a white employer complained that the Mountain Terrace bus regularly passed "colored maids and cooks" and therefore made them late to work, the company took action. According to the report, "Operators on this line [were] cautioned."<sup>58</sup>

Among the majority of black domestics who had to travel alone at night, the fear of being passed or forced to wait for the next vehicle created a sense of danger.

<sup>58</sup> For employees' complaints about the South Bessemer line, Aug. 2, 1942, and the West End line, June 3, 1942, see "Race Complaints for Last Twelve Months," Sept. 1, 1941, to Aug. 31, 1942, box 10, Green Papers. "Reports Involving Race Question," Dec. 1943, p. 2, *ibid.*; "Reports Involving the Race Question," Sept. 1943, p. 2, *ibid.* See also "Reports Involving Race Question," May 1944, p. 2, *ibid.*

Standing at a poorly lit, relatively isolated bus stop left them prey to sexual and physical assault by white and black men. As the sociologist Carol Brooks Gardner reminds us, in many neighborhoods the streets, particularly at night, are perceived as belonging to men, and women without escorts are perceived as available or vulnerable. In the South, that perception applied mostly (though not exclusively) to black women, since the ideology of chivalry obligated white men to come to the defense of white women—though not always working-class white women. To argue that black women's open resistance on the buses is incompatible with their fear when on the streets misses the crucial point that buses and streetcars, though sites of vicious repression, were occupied, lighted public spaces where potential allies and witnesses might be found.<sup>59</sup>

Such black resistance on Birmingham's public transit system conveyed a sense of dramatic opposition to Jim Crow before an audience. But discursive strategies, which may seem more evasive, also carry tremendous dramatic appeal. No matter how effective drivers, conductors, and signs were at keeping bodies separated, black voices flowed easily into the section designated for whites, constantly reminding riders that racially divided public space was contested terrain. Black passengers were routinely ejected and occasionally arrested for making too much noise, often by directing harsh words at a conductor or passenger or launching a monologue about racism in general. Such monologues or verbal attacks on racism make for excellent theater. Unlike passersby who can hurry by a lecturing street corner preacher, passengers were trapped until they reached their destination, the space silenced by the anonymity of the riders. The reports reveal a hypersensitivity to black voices rising from the back of the bus. Indeed, verbal protests or complaints registered by black passengers were frequently described as "loud"—an adjective almost never used to describe the way white passengers articulated their grievances. One morning in August 1943, during the peak hours, a black man boarded an Acipco line bus and immediately began "complaining about discrimination against negroes in a very loud voice."<sup>60</sup> Black voices, especially the loud and profane, literally penetrated and occupied white spaces.

Cursing, a related discursive strategy, was among the crimes for which black passengers were most commonly arrested. Moreover, only black passengers were arrested for cursing. The act elicited police intervention, not because the state maintained strict moral standards and would not tolerate profanity, but because it represented a serious transgression of racial boundaries. While scholars might belittle the power of resistive, profane noise as opposition, Birmingham's policing structure did not.

<sup>59</sup> Carol Brooks Gardner, "Analyzing Gender in Public Places: Rethinking Goffman's Vision of Everyday Life," *American Sociologist*, 20 (Spring 1989), 42–56.

<sup>60</sup> "Reports Involving Race Question," May 1944, pp. 2–3, box 10, Green Papers; "Reports Involving Race Question," Aug. 1943, p. 1, *ibid.* "Loud-talking," according to linguistic anthropologist Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, is an age-old discursive strategy among African Americans which "by virtue of its volume permits hearers other than the addressee, and is objectionable because of this. Loud-talking requires an audience and can only occur in a situation where there are potential hearers other than the interlocutors." Moreover, loud-talking assumes "an antagonistic posture toward the addressee." Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, "Signifying, Loud-talking, and Marking," in *Rappin' and Stylin' Out*, ed. Kochman, 329, 331.

On the South Bessemer line in 1942, one black man was sentenced to six months in jail for cursing. In most instances, however, cursing was punishable by a ten-dollar fine and court costs, and jail sentences averaged about thirty days.<sup>61</sup>

Some might argue that the hundreds of everyday acts of resistance in public spaces—from the most evasive to the blatantly confrontational—amount to very little since they were individualized, isolated events that almost always ended in defeat. Such an argument misses the unique, dramaturgical quality of these actions within the interior spaces of public conveyances; whenever passengers were present no act of defiance was isolated. Nor were acts of defiance isolating experiences. Because African-American passengers shared a collective memory of how they were treated on a daily basis, both within and without the “moving theaters,” an act of resistance or repression sometimes drew other passengers into the fray. An interesting report from an Avenue F line bus driver in October 1943 illustrates such a moment of collective resistance: “Operator went to adjust the color boards, and negro woman sat down quickly just in front of board that operator was putting in place. She objected to moving and was not exactly disorderly but all the negroes took it up and none of [the] whites would sit in seat because they were afraid to, and negroes would not sit in vacant seats in rear of bus.”<sup>62</sup>

Most occupants sitting in the rear who witnessed or took part in the daily skirmishes learned that punishment was inevitable. The arrests, beatings, and ejections were intended as much for all the black passengers on board as for the individual transgressor. The authorities’ fear of an incident escalating into collective opposition often meant that individuals who intervened in conflicts instigated by others received the harshest punishment. On the South Bessemer line one early evening in 1943, a young black man was arrested and fined twenty-five dollars for coming to the defense of a black woman who was told to move behind the color dividers. His crime was that he “complained and talked back to the officer.” The fear of arrest or ejection could persuade individuals who had initially joined collective acts of resistance to retreat. Even when a single, dramatic act captured the imaginations of other black passengers and spurred them to take action, there was no guarantee that it would lead to sustained, collective opposition. To take one example, a black woman and man boarded the South East Lake–Ensley line one evening in 1943 and removed the color dividers, prompting all of the black passengers already on board and boarding to occupy the white section. When the conductor demanded that they move to their assigned area, all grudgingly complied except the couple who had initiated the rebellion. They were subsequently arrested.<sup>63</sup>

Spontaneous, collective protest did not always fizzle out at the site of contestation. Occasionally the passengers approached formal civil rights organizations asking them to intercede or to lead a campaign against city transit. Following the arrest

<sup>61</sup> “Incidents Reported,” Sept. 1, 1941, to Aug. 31, 1942, pp. 4–6, box 10, Green Papers. On public cursing as a powerful symbolic act of resistance, see Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 215.

<sup>62</sup> “Reports Involving Race Question,” Oct. 1943, p. 3, box 10, Green Papers.

<sup>63</sup> “Reports Involving Race Question,” March 1943, p. 1, *ibid.*; “Reports Involving Race Question,” Oct. 1943, p. 2, *ibid.*

of Pauline Carth in 1943, a group of witnesses brought the case to the attention of the Birmingham branch of the NAACP, but aside from a perfunctory investigation and an article in the black-owned *Birmingham World*, no action was taken. The Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), a left-wing organization based in Birmingham, attempted a direct-action campaign on the Fairfield bus line after receiving numerous complaints from black youth about conditions on public transportation. Mildred McAdory and three other SNYC activists attempted to move the color boards on a Fairfield bus in 1942, for which she was beaten and arrested by Fairfield police. As a result of the incident, the SNYC formed a short-lived organization, the Citizens Committee for Equal Accommodations on Common Carriers. However, the treatment of African Americans on public transportation was not a high-priority issue for Birmingham's black protest organizations during the war, and very few middle-class blacks rode public transportation. Thus working people whose livelihood depended on city transit had to fend for themselves.<sup>64</sup>

The critical point here is that the actions of black passengers forced mainstream black political organizations to pay some attention to conditions on Jim Crow buses and streetcars. Unorganized, seemingly powerless black working people brought these issues to the forefront by their resistance, which was shaped by relations of domination as well as the many confrontations they witnessed on the stage of the moving theater. Their very acts of insubordination challenged the system of segregation, whether they were intended to or not, and their defiance in most cases elicited a swift and decisive response. Even before the war ended, everyday acts of resistance on buses and streetcars declined for two reasons. First, resistance compelled the transit company to "re-instruct" the most blatantly discourteous drivers and conductors, who cost the company precious profits by passing up black passengers or initiating unwarranted violence. Second, and more important, the acts of defiance led to an increase in punitive measures and more vigorous enforcement of segregation laws. An internal study by the Birmingham Transportation Department concluded, "continued re-instruction of train men and bus operators, as well as additional vigilance on the part of our private police, has resulted in some improvement."<sup>65</sup>

The bitter struggles waged by black working people on public transportation, though obviously exacerbated by wartime social, political, and economic transformations, should force labor historians to rethink the meaning of public space as a terrain of class, race, and gender conflict. The workplace and struggles to improve working conditions are fundamental to the study of labor history. For southern black workers, however, the most embattled sites of opposition were frequently public spaces, partly because policing proved far more difficult in public spaces than in places of work. Not only were employees constantly under the watchful eye of

<sup>64</sup> *Birmingham World*, Oct. 29, 1943; "Southern Negro Youth Congress—Forum," Feb. 6, 1984, untranscribed tape, Oral History of the American Left (Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, N.Y.); FBI Report, "Southern Negro Youth Congress, Birmingham, Alabama," June 14, 1943, p. 5, Headquarters File 100-82, Southern Negro Youth Congress Files (J. Edgar Hoover FBI Building, Washington, D.C.); James Jackson, "For Common Courtesy on Common Carriers," *Worker*, June 4, 1963.

<sup>65</sup> N. H. Hawkins, Jr., Birmingham Electric Company Transportation Department, n.d., box 10, Green Papers.

foremen, managers, and employers, but workers could also be dismissed, suspended, or have their pay docked on a whim. In the public spaces of the city, however, the anonymity and sheer numbers of the crowd, whose movement was not directed by the discipline of work (and was therefore unpredictable), meant a more vigilant and violent system of maintaining social order. Arrests and beatings were always a possibility, but so was escape. Thus, for black workers public spaces both embodied the most repressive, violent aspects of race and gender oppression and, paradoxically, afforded more opportunities to engage in acts of resistance than the workplace itself.

### Black Working-Class Infrapolitics and the Revision of Southern Political History

Shifting our focus from formal, organized politics to infrapolitics enables us to recover the oppositional practices of black working people who, until recently, have been presumed to be silent or inarticulate. Contrary to the image of an active black elite and a passive working class one generally finds in race relations scholarship, members of the most oppressed section of the black community always resisted, but often in a manner intended to cover their tracks. Given the incredibly violent and repressive forms of domination in the South, workers' dependence on wages, the benefits white workers derived from Jim Crow, the limited influence black working people exercised over white-dominated trade unions, and the complex and contradictory nature of human agency, evasive, clandestine forms of resistance should be expected. When thinking about the Jim Crow South, we need always to keep in mind that African Americans, the working class in particular, did not *experience* a liberal democracy. They lived and struggled in a world that resembled, at least from their vantage point, a fascist or, more appropriately, a colonial situation.

Whether or not battles were won or lost, everyday forms of opposition and the mere threat of open resistance elicited responses from the powerful that, in turn, shaped the nature of struggle. Opposition and containment, repression and resistance are inextricably linked. A pioneering study, Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts*, illustrates the dynamic. The opening chapters, "The Fear of Rebellion" and "The Machinery of Control," show how slave actions and gestures and mere discussions of rebellion created social and political tensions for the master class and compelled southern rulers to erect a complex and expensive structure to maintain order. Furthermore, Aptheker shows us how resistance and the threat of resistance were inscribed in the law itself; thus, even when black opposition appeared invisible or was censored by the press, it still significantly shaped southern political and legal structures. The opening chapters of Aptheker's book (the chapters most of his harshest critics ignored) demonstrate what Stuart Hall means when he says "hegemonizing is hard work."<sup>66</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 18–78, 140–61 *passim*. For Stuart Hall's statement, see George Lipsitz, "The Struggle for Hegemony," *Journal of American History*, 75 (June 1988), 148. On the dialectic between

Hegemonizing was indeed hard work, in part because African-American resistance did make a difference. We know that southern rulers during this era devoted enormous financial and ideological resources to maintaining order. Police departments, vagrancy laws, extralegal terrorist organizations, the spectacle of mutilated black bodies—all were part of the landscape of domination surrounding African Americans. Widely publicized accounts of police homicides, beatings, and lynchings as well as of black protest against such acts of racist violence abound in the literature on the Jim Crow South.<sup>67</sup> Yet, dramatic acts of racial violence and resistance represent only the tip of a gigantic iceberg. The attitudes of most working-class blacks toward the police were informed by an accumulation of daily indignities, whether experienced or witnessed. African Americans often endured illegal searches and seizures, detainment without charge, billy clubs, nightsticks, public humiliation, lewd remarks, loaded guns against their skulls. African-American women endured sexual innuendo, molestation during body searches, and outright rape. Although such incidents were repeated in public spaces on a daily basis, they are rarely a matter of public record. Nevertheless, everyday confrontations between African Americans and police not only were important sites of contestation but also help explain why the more dramatic cases carry such resonance in black communities.<sup>68</sup>

We need to recognize that infrapolitics and organized resistance are not two distinct realms of opposition to be studied separately and then compared; they are two sides of the same coin that make up the history of working-class self-activity. As I have tried to illustrate, the historical relationships between the hidden transcript and organized political movements during the age of Jim Crow suggest that some trade unions and political organizations succeeded in mobilizing segments of the black working class because they at least partially articulated the grievances, aspirations, and dreams that remained hidden from public view. Yet we must not assume that all action that flowed from organized resistance was merely an articulation of a preexisting oppositional consciousness, thus underestimating collective struggle as a shaper of working-class consciousness.<sup>69</sup> The relationship between black working-class infrapolitics and collective, open engagement with power is dialectical, not a teleological transformation from unconscious accommodation to conscious resistance. Hence, efforts by grass-roots unions to mobilize southern black workers, from the Knights of Labor and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters to the Communist party and the CIO, shaped or even transformed the hidden transcript. Successful struggles that depend on mutual support among working people

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southern black working-class self-activity and the response of employers, bureaucrats, social reformers, and the state, see Hunter, "Household Workers in the Making," 187–291 *passim*.

<sup>67</sup> The literature on the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries alone is extensive. The best overview is Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response*.

<sup>68</sup> Kelley, "Black Poor and the Politics of Opposition," 309, 311–12, 318–23, 327–29, 331–33, Kuhn, Joye, and West, *Living Atlanta*, 337–41; Wright, *Life Behind a Veil*, 254–57.

<sup>69</sup> Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*; Michael Schwartz, *Radical Protest and Social Structure: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Alliance and Cotton Tenancy, 1880–1890* (Chicago, 1976); Rick Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers* (Berkeley, 1988); Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*.

and a clear knowledge of the “enemy” not only strengthen bonds of class (or race or gender) solidarity but also reveal to workers the vulnerability of the powerful and the potential strength of the weak. Furthermore, at the workplace as in public spaces, the daily humiliations of racism, sexism, and waged work embolden subordinate groups to take risks when opportunities arise. And their failures are as important as their victories, for they drive home the point that each act of transgression has its price. Black workers, like most aggrieved populations, do not decide to challenge dominant groups simply because of the lessons they have learned; rather, the very power relations that force them to resist covertly also make clear the terrible consequences of failed struggles.

In the end, whether or not African Americans chose to join working-class organizations, their daily experiences, articulated mainly in unmonitored social spaces, constituted the ideological and cultural foundations for constructing a collective identity. Their actions, thoughts, conversations, and reflections were not always, or even primarily, concerned with work, nor did they abide well with formal working-class institutions, no matter how well these institutions articulated aspects of the hidden transcript. In other words, we cannot presume that trade unions and similar labor institutions were the “real” standard bearers of black working-class politics; even for organized black workers they were probably only a small part of an array of formal and informal strategies by which people struggled to improve or transform daily life. Thus for a worker to accept reformist trade union strategies while stealing from work, to fight streetcar conductors while voting down strike action in the local, to leave work early in order to participate in religious revival meetings or rendezvous with a lover, to attend a dance rather than a CIO mass meeting was not to manifest an “immature” class consciousness. Such actions reflect the multiple ways black working people live, experience, and interpret the world around them. To assume that politics is something separate from all these events and decisions is to balkanize people’s lives and thus completely miss how struggles over power, autonomy, and pleasure take place in the daily lives of working people. People do not organize their lives around our disciplinary boundaries or analytical categories; they are, as Elsa Barkley Brown so aptly puts it, “polyrhythmic.”<sup>70</sup>

Although the approach outlined above is still schematic and tentative (there is so much I have left out, including a crucial discussion of periodization), I am convinced that the realm of infrapolitics—from everyday resistance at work and in public spaces to the elusive hidden transcripts recorded in working-class discourses and cultures—holds rich insights into twentieth-century black political struggle. As recent scholarship in black working-class and community history has begun to demonstrate, to understand the political significance of these hidden transcripts and everyday oppositional strategies, we must think differently about politics and reject the artificial divisions between political history and social history. A “remapping” of the sites of opposition should bring us closer to “knowing” the people Richard Wright correctly insists are not what they seem.

<sup>70</sup> Brown, “‘What Has Happened Here,’” 295–312.