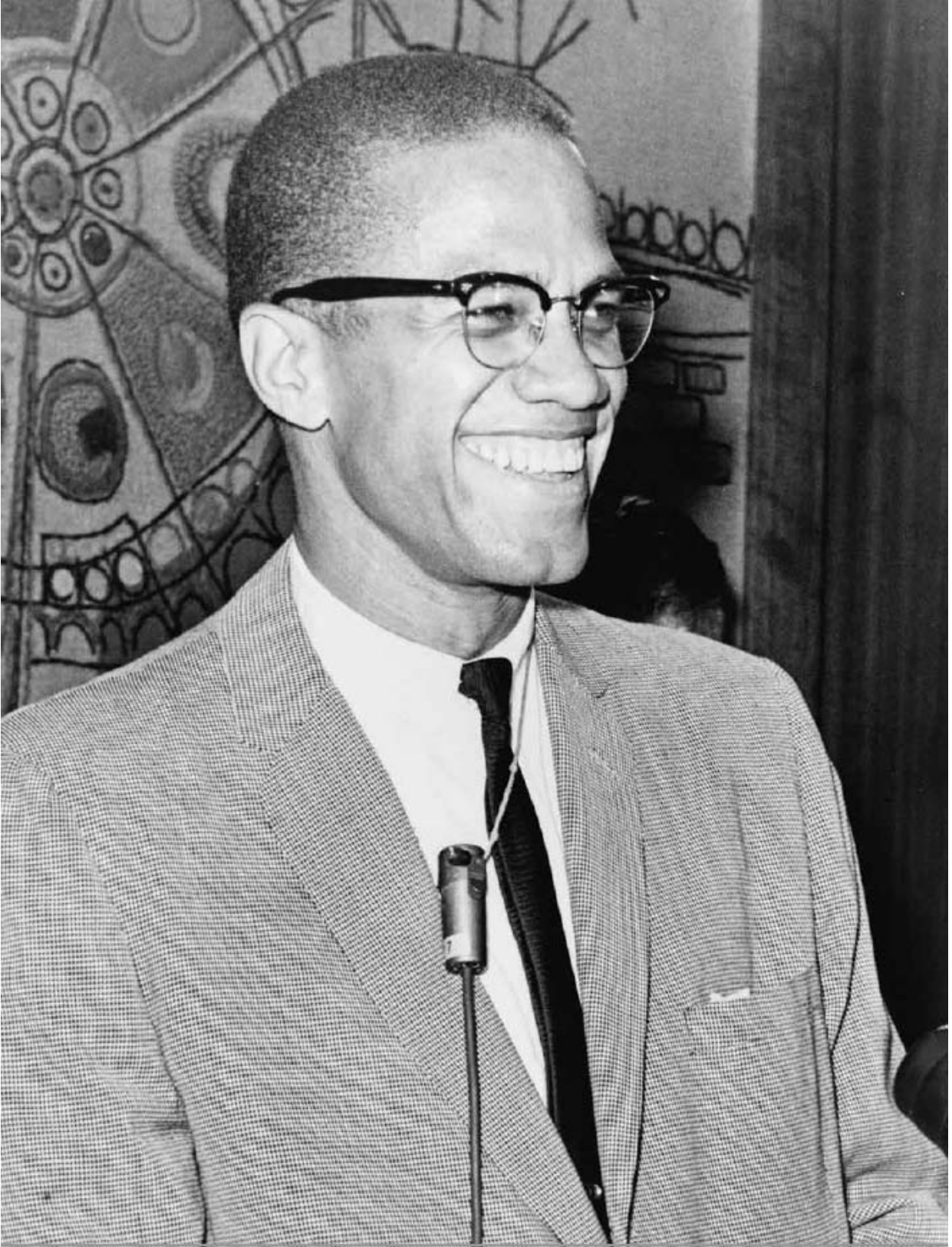


The DEAD ARE
ARISING

The Life of MALCOLM X

LES PAYNE
WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

TAMARA
PAYNE



Malcolm X smiling, ca. 1964. (Photograph by Ed Ford for New York World-Telegram and Sun, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

THE DEAD ARE ARISING



THE LIFE OF MALCOLM X

Les Payne
and Tamara Payne



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To Violet, whose love and support are the foundation upon which this work was completed.

To Tamara, whose tireless effort was integral in the completion of this work.

To the family—both nuclear and extended—whom I wanted to make proud with all of my work and effort in the world over the years.

And in loving memory of the life and legacy of Les Payne.

CONTENTS

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Introduction by Tamara Payne](#)

[PART I: 1925–1939](#)

[CHAPTER 1: Born Against the Current](#)

[CHAPTER 2: Storms of Racism](#)

[CHAPTER 3: The Anchor Is Lost](#)

[CHAPTER 4: Pulling the Family Apart](#)

[PART II: 1939–1946](#)

[CHAPTER 5: East Lansing Red](#)

[CHAPTER 6: Lighting Out for His Territory](#)

[CHAPTER 7: Chased Out of Seventh Heaven](#)

[CHAPTER 8: Luck Runs Out](#)

CHAPTER 9: Learning to Fight with Words

PART III: 1946–1963

CHAPTER 10: Birth of the Nation of Islam

CHAPTER 11: Building Temples in the East

CHAPTER 12: Hartford: “The Dead There Are Rising”

CHAPTER 13: “Meet with Them Devils”

CHAPTER 14: Malcolm, the Media, and Martin Luther King

PART IV: 1963–1965

CHAPTER 15: The Split

CHAPTER 16: The International Stage

CHAPTER 17: The Week Before: A Dry Run

CHAPTER 18: The Hit

CHAPTER 19: Back at the Mosque

EPILOGUE

Illustrations Insert

Appendix: Malik Shabazz (Malcolm X): Some Questions Answered

Notes

Selected Bibliography.

Index

INTRODUCTION

[by Tamara Payne](#)

WHEN MY FATHER, LES PAYNE, BEGAN HIS RESEARCH IN 1990 for *The Dead Are Arising*, Malcolm X was very much alive in the consciousness of the black community. Walking down Harlem's 125th Street, you would hear Malcolm's emphatic voice resounding from the speakers of sidewalk vendors selling his speeches and you would see his countenance emblazoned on T-shirts.

This generation of hip-hop embraced Malcolm X because he spoke directly to them. His messages provided clear, direct analyses of what was happening around them in their communities. Point by point, he outlined how state-sanctioned racism is not new, but a continuation of the coordinated destruction of black people in America. Malcolm changed the way they viewed themselves and gave voice to their struggles; numerous rappers and activists quoted Malcolm in their lyrics and interviews on radio and television.

Malcolm also changed the way Les Payne viewed himself. As a college student in 1963, he had heard Malcolm speak in Hartford, Connecticut. On that June night, my father came face-to-face with his own self-loathing. Malcolm X

addressed the race issue head-on:

"Now I know you don't want to be called 'black,'" he said. . . . "You want to be called 'Negro.'

But what does 'Negro' mean except 'black' in Spanish? So what you are saying is: 'It's OK to call me 'black' in Spanish, but don't call me black in English.'" [1](#)

Later, in "The Night I Stopped Being a Negro," an essay that was first published in a collection titled *When Race Becomes Real*, Payne wrote that he had entered "Bushnell Hall as a Negro with a capital 'N' and wandered out into

the parking lot—as a black man. ["2](#)

Born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Payne had moved to Hartford with his mother and two brothers at age twelve:

I'd never met a white person, South or North, who did not feel comfortably superior to every Negro, no matter the rank or station. Conversely, no Negro I'd met or heard of had ever felt truly equal to whites. For all their polemical posturing, not even Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., or the great Richard Wright, with all his crossed-up feelings, had liberated themselves from the poisoned weed of black self-loathing with its deeply entangled roots in the psyche. [3](#)

The lightning strike of Malcolm's sword released the "conditioned sense of Negro inferiority" that was housed in the college junior's psyche. Hearing Malcolm's piercing analysis forced him to think about the Jim Crow South he was born into: remembering how he was told that Negroes were "just as good"

as whites, but seeing Negroes rise only to janitors, cooks, cotton pickers—not to landlords or owners of lumberyards. By the end of the lecture, Payne was irrevocably changed. "Whites were no longer superior. Blacks . . . were no longer inferior," [4](#) he wrote.

Always inspired by Malcolm X, Payne would reread his dog-eared copy of the *Autobiography* every five years. So he was naturally curious when his high school buddy Walter O. Evans, who had become a successful surgeon in Detroit, introduced him to Philbert Little, one of Malcolm X's brothers. Payne discussed this meeting with Gil Noble, a friend and fellow journalist who at the time hosted the weekly Sunday show *Like It Is* on WABC-TV in New York. In addition to his work as a renowned broadcaster, Noble was an admirer of Malcolm X. Every year, he dedicated episodes of *Like It Is* to the life and assassination of Malcolm X. Noble suggested that Payne also meet Wilfred Little, Malcolm's oldest brother and best friend.

At the time, Payne was an editor at *Newsday*, a daily newspaper on Long Island. He had won a Pulitzer Prize in 1974 as part of a reporting team investigating the international flow of heroin from the poppy fields of Turkey, through the French connection, and into the veins of New York drug addicts. He was renowned for his investigative persistence and his skill in

obtaining the truth from reluctant sources. As he often told his three children—Jamal, Haile, and myself—he could not abide the phrase “We may never know.”

After sitting down in Detroit with the two siblings, he was shocked to realize how much he did not know about the man whom he had admired and studied.

For such a persistent seeker of the true story, the fact that so much remained unknown about Malcolm proved irresistible. It set my father on a journey that

unknown about Malcolm proved irresistible. It set my father on a journey that would last twenty-eight years, until his untimely death in 2018.

Tracing Malcolm X’s steps—from the Nebraska cauldron he was born into and the family life that shaped him to the gunshots that would silence him forever—Payne traveled around the world, conducting hundreds of interviews with Malcolm’s family members, childhood friends, classmates, buddies on the streets and in prison, as well as cops, bodyguards, FBI agents, drivers, informers, photographers, journalists, U.N. representatives, African revolutionaries and presidents, sworn enemies, fake followers, and the two men falsely imprisoned for shooting him dead.

As he tracked down how Malcolm became the person he was, he learned an extraordinary amount of biographical detail that was new. Even though much has been written about Malcolm in the years since Payne’s investigation began, much that he found has never been told before or has been sketched only roughly, without the deeply reported detail and color that bring a life to life again.

Plying his Pulitzer-level skills as an investigative reporter, Payne was mindful that even though Malcolm X told his story well, his and other published accounts are neither fully rendered nor entirely accurate. Accordingly, the reader will discover that key trails explored in *The Dead Are Arising* are less well-trodden, and some—details of Malcolm’s sit-down with the Ku Klux Klan, for example—were long considered unattainable. Through extensive interviewing and reporting, the reader is now brought in

on this 1961 meeting around the kitchen table of Minister Jeremiah [X*](#) in Atlanta.

The Dead Are Arising sheds light on Earl Little's tragic death in 1931, and Malcolm's haunting, lifelong doubts about the official version are, after extensive investigation, squared with the facts. New details about the breakup of the family reveal the roles played by state institutions, an insurance company, and young Malcolm himself as his mother tried to care for her eight children during the harshest years of the Depression, in the end, crumbling in on herself.

"Instead of being the happy person when our father was alive," said one son, "she was quiet. My mother stopped singing."

The Dead Are Arising also provides a new portrait of the young man known as East Lansing Red (long before he was dubbed Detroit Red), as Malcolm, starting at age twelve, hustled reefers from a neighbor's garden plot and then became a sneak thief by pilfering scarce cash even from his mother: "Malcolm never would deny that he stole," recalled one of his brothers, who had caught

him red-handed. "He was not a liar." He was, however, reckless. And long before the Muslim days, Malcolm's craving for attention was chilling, as when he challenged a notorious Lansing cop holding a gun to his adolescent head: "Go ahead! Pull the trigger, Whitey."

This biography will show readers in often astonishing detail how Malcolm, as the Nation of Islam's great proselytizer, "fished" for converts and built a disciplined chapter, inciting a group of New England prospects to service in a cramped, housing-project apartment, while implicitly shaming the shorts-clad daughter of the house with his call to modesty. Away from media noise, the presence of ever wary cops, the muscling of rivals—and even the coaxing of the Nation of Islam's leader, Elijah Muhammad—we catch an early glimpse of how Malcolm would run things when left alone.

Finally, the book provides readers with a moment-by-moment account of the February 1965 assassination, which is reconstructed with unparalleled

vividness.

Les Payne's sources here include the undercover New York City policeman whose testimony might have cleared two men who were unjustly sentenced for the murder, and a member of the Nation's Newark "goon squad" who provides an insider's account of the planning and immediate aftermath of the murder.

This work, moreover, contextualizes Malcolm's life against the racial conflicts, violence, and aspirations of twentieth-century America—all of this history richly rendered. Along the way, *The Dead Are Arising* provides portraits of the Marcus Garvey movement that shaped young Malcolm's early life, the Nation of Islam organization that gave him direction when he came out of prison, and the Ku Klux Klan that he saw at one time as the most honest face of white America.

Although Les Payne's investigative research revealed much that was new about Malcolm's life, his assessment of Malcolm's core message did not change.

In a 1989 column, he wrote:

More than any other leader of the 1960's, Malcolm moved blacks to consider who they were and whence they came, and to plan for what they could become. He saw his people as a brutalized class, who after centuries of slavery and oppression had been made to think of themselves—and to act—as inferiors, as "niggers."

To correct this condition, the black man could either work on the outer manifestations of discrimination—as did Martin Luther King—or change himself from within, through transformation. Malcolm took the latter course, both in teaching and in his personal life on this planet. He underwent a dramatic conversion, from street criminal to devoted moralist and revolutionary.

Along the way, Malcolm sought to upset the white man's grossly inflated sense of himself, his complacent arrogance and smugness. In rejecting the

dominant society that had rejected him, he instructed his followers to reject the white man's ideas, values and above all, the way he looked

instructed his followers to reject the white man's ideas, values and above all, the way he looked down upon blacks as inferiors.

King offered racists the other cheek, Malcolm the back of his hand. Freedom was so important to him that Malcolm counseled risking all, except one's sense of self-respect, in the fight.

Nonviolence, he taught, unduly narrowed an oppressed people's options. "We have to change our minds about each other," Malcolm said often to his followers.[5](#)

Even as he tracked Malcolm X, Payne was busy at *Newsday*. He wrote a weekly syndicated column, and as an assistant managing editor, he was in charge of the daily newspaper's state, national, international, and science coverage.

During the years he worked on this book, he supervised reporting that won four Pulitzer Prizes: for coverage of genocide in Bosnia, U.S. friendly fire deaths in Iraq, Ebola in Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo), and the aftermath of genocide in Rwanda. Outside of *Newsday*, he participated in a weekly discussion panel on *Sunday Edition*, a popular CBS Sunday morning news show.

In 1975, he helped to found the National Association of Black Journalists, which was organized to "improve the number of black journalists over all in America. [To] improve the treatment of black journalists already in the profession. [To] improve the coverage of the black community and the third world community," explained Payne. "We had to organize and challenge the industry of journalism. Confront and demand these things because black people read newspapers. Black people watch television. Plus, a lot of the information the media puts out about black people is distorted." And then in 1992 he helped to found the Trotter Group of black columnists, named after William Monroe Trotter, a black journalist and editor of the *Boston Guardian*. Trotter was thrown out of the White House in 1914 for arguing with President Wilson against the policy of segregating federal offices. In

addition to organizing black columnists, the Trotter Group met with both President Clinton and President Obama during their terms in office.

Some fifty years after William Trotter's White House incident, Payne started his career in journalism as a federal employee of a sort. After graduating from the University of Connecticut, he spent six years in the U.S. Army as a Ranger, serving as an information officer in Vietnam for General William Westmoreland, where Payne ran the army newspaper. In 1969, attired in his captain's uniform, he applied for a job at *Newsday*, where he stayed until his retirement in 2006, but at every stage of his life he confronted racism. "When I was a rookie reporter," he later recalled, "my young daughter asked why there were no blacks among *Newsday*'s 102 summer interns, in 1973, I shot off a note

to management demanding an explanation. The reason I gave Tami, I wrote in my note to *Newsday*, was that her daddy worked for a 'racist newspaper.'"

As the young daughter cited here, I have worked on this book as a researcher since its earliest days. In a meeting with Faith Childs, his literary agent, Payne shared his experience of meeting the two Little brothers. He was intrigued by what he had learned from them. It was at this meeting he decided to write *The Dead Are Arising*. The title refers to Malcolm's description of conversion into the Nation of Islam. Before they joined the Nation of Islam, members were

"dead" because they did not know their true selves. Elijah Muhammad's teachings—particularly those aimed at strengthening black communities through improving their diet and removing distractions of prostitution, gambling, drugs, and alcohol—enabled members to free themselves from the false sense of inferiority imposed by the larger society. Malcolm continued his work of eradicating this inferiority complex after he left the Nation of Islam, until his death. This work remains unfinished.

Embarking on this journey, Payne continued working at *Newsday*. *The Dead Are Arising* became one more project he had to manage. He hired Paul Lee, a professional researcher who has dedicated much of his career to archiving accurate records about Malcolm's life and work. Payne also brought on Elizabeth Bass, a longtime colleague and trusted friend, as an editor. Bass

had worked for him as the science and health editor at *Newsday*. She also had served as *Newsday*'s deputy national editor and deputy foreign editor. Over the next twenty-eight years, this team worked with my father to bring this book together.

Les Payne's untimely death on March 19, 2018, left both his immediate and his larger family devastated. In my sorrow and disbelief, I knew that the final work—his life's work, as he would refer to this book—had to be completed.

Assisting in tracking down many of those who were interviewed for this book, I have also transcribed most of the interviews. My father had also brought me along on some of the interviews. Meeting Malcolm's associates and family members over the years and watching Les Payne's investigative techniques at work have been the unique reward of a lifetime for me. My many discussions with him about how this work was taking shape proved to be invaluable in the finishing of the manuscript. As the copilot and conavigator, I could confidently and successfully complete this part of the journey.

The manuscript was mostly finished by the time of his death. With the help and support of my family, Faith Childs, Elizabeth Bass, Robert Weil of Liveright/W. W. Norton, and countless others, I was able to bring the manuscript

to the desired end. I was thankfully able to follow my father's lead, as he tracked Malcolm's steps, in his words, "from street criminal to devoted moralist and revolutionary."

* In America the surname for black people usually is that of the slave owners and does not reflect their African family heritage. Therefore, members of the Nation of Islam change their surname to "X," which stands for unknown. If there is more than one person with the same first name in a Nation of Islam temple, or mosque, a numeral is placed before the "X" representing the number of people with that name that precede them, such as Charles 37X or Benjamin 7X.

PART I

1925–1939

CHAPTER 1

Born Against the Current

THE METALLIC CLICKING OF HOOFBEATS ON THE GRAVEL ROAD drew five-year-old Wilfred to the small-pane window. His mother, wiping her hands, hurried to the front door as a group of horsemen with flickering torches rode up to their wood-frame home on the outskirts of Omaha, Nebraska.

“Little!” yelled one of the half dozen men.

Louise Little said that her husband was not at home. And with the tree leaves rustling in the evening breeze, the horsemen steadied their mounts in the front yard, and declared that they were the “knights” of the Ku Klux Klan.

“Get that nigger out here, now!” one of the strangers shouted. 1

Haltingly, a young housewife, 2 precise in her West Indian accent, said that her family didn’t cause trouble or bother neighbors, that they minded their own business. The excitement of the horses died down for young Wilfred as his mother folded her arms. Seen against the flickering kerosene light, she was a sight that, at least momentarily, might have given the white vigilantes pause.

Light-complexioned, with thick hair flowing to her waist, Mrs. Little stood taller than the average man of her day, at more than five feet eight inches. And she was pregnant. “She was big,” Wilfred said years later, “she was expecting at any time.”

“Y’all” better get on out of town, said the man in front, exclaiming that they didn’t tolerate “troublemakers.” Bristling before the young family, the

Klansmen clutched their shotguns by the trigger housing and made “all kinds of threats,”

clutched their shotguns by the trigger housing and made “all kinds of threats,”

aimed chiefly against the man of the house. The unfolding drama puzzled the eldest child of the household.

“I didn’t know what to make of it,” Wilfred recalled. “My mother was angry, so naturally, I’m angry too. My mother is challenging ’em, you know, verbally, she never used any profanity.” Still, several of the men waved gun barrels toward the door as another spurred his horse forward, shaking his torch at the defiant Mrs. Little.

“My mother kept arguing,” Wilfred said. “[The Klan leader] got mad. He took the butt of his rifle and knocked the front window out.” Baby brother Philbert started crying in a back room and three-year-old Hilda tugged at her mother’s housedress. If fear of the gunmen gripped Mrs. Little, her children detected no sign in her tone and body language, as Wilfred recalled the incident years later. The children, in fact, drew lasting strength from the manner in which their mother stood her ground that spring evening before the bullying white strangers on horseback. However, contrary to his initial impressions, Wilfred would conclude later that it helped greatly that his father was indeed not at home.

Eventually, the armed knights of the Klan jerked their horses around in apparent frustration, dipped their torches, and without firing a shot, galloped away as dusk turned into pitch darkness. Their memory of the standoff, dangerous and yet alluring to the youngsters at the time, would trouble them for the rest of their lives, especially the keenly observant Wilfred. After he learned that such Ku Klux Klan visits often ended with roped Negro bodies dangling from a tree, flashbacks of the terror would bolt him awake from youthful sleep some nights. And this eldest child of the Little family would later recount for the author poignant details about that fateful evening.

After the vigilantes rode away, the pregnant mother of three did not consider calling police to be a viable option because Negroes understood that city

officials generally approved of such Klan activity. Instead, she sought help from prosperous acquaintances, using their two-piece, candlestick telephone to get word of the emergency to her preacher husband, some five hundred miles away in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. [3](#)

The Reverend Earl Little booked the next train back to Omaha. Having moved away from their first cramped quarters on the northern strip of city blocks designated for Negroes, the growing family now lived in a rented farmhouse—

among white neighbors. In the Omaha of the 1920s, this exercise of open housing was a civil right reserved strictly for Caucasians; however, violating the policy was in keeping with the rebellious spirit of the pioneering, young Negro

policy was in keeping with the rebellious spirit of the pioneering, young Negro couple. Their breach did not go unnoticed by white residents, including the Klan.

Upon discovering the “treachery” of the white property owners who had rented to the Littles, neighbors turned downright unneighborly—except for an immigrant Hungarian family who, despite icy stares of others, befriended the Littles even as they were openly harassed as “Negro troublemakers.”

All across America, during the first half of the twentieth century, such was the treatment of blacks who dared exercise civil rights reserved for “whites only.” In the North, the racial divide was de facto and maintained at key levels of society, including housing, education, employment, restaurants, nightclubs, hotels, bars, hospitals, and even church services. In the South, where racial segregation was de jure, Jim Crow laws codified by state and county governments posted dire “white only” warning signs everywhere and fielded brutal sheriff’s departments to enforce the policy, with unofficial assistance from vigilantes such as the Ku Klux Klan.

Upon arriving back home in Omaha, Reverend Little paced the floor as his young wife detailed how she and the children had weathered the raid of the

white knights. Dark-skinned and standing more than six feet four inches, the reverend had a glass eye from an accident back home in Georgia, when a nail had pitched up from an errant blow of his hammer and struck his left eye.

Despite the lawlessness of the Klan ordeal, Reverend Little agreed that calling the Omaha police about the vigilante raid would have gone for naught. Already, the trek into town for household goods and services by borrowed horse and wagon had been risky for the isolated family. Now the Klan visit had rendered their very home unsafe.

Under this uniquely American cloud of racial dread, the Reverend Earl Little and his pregnant wife, Louise—the parents of daughter Hilda and sons Wilfred and Philbert—awaited the birth of their fourth child.

Louise Norton Little arrived by horse and wagon at Omaha's University Hospital and was signed in at the admission office as: "West Indian housewife."

She was attended by Dr. W. A. Lear, a white obstetrician, as such state institutions of the day did not grant practice privileges to Negro physicians.

After a routine delivery that Tuesday evening, Dr. Lear applied the requisite water solution to each eye of the infant and declared him alive and healthy. It was 10:29 p.m. on May 19, 1925.[4](#)

The parents named their baby boy Malcolm. This future icon of the global human rights struggle was the fetus that Mrs. Louise Little was carrying that night the Klan terrorized her family at the doorstep. Some years later, his brother Wilfred would render detailed recollections about the family to the author, many hours of which were tape-recorded over a period of five years, along with in-depth interviews with three younger siblings and telephone chats with two others. This material, including some closely held secrets, was supplemented by accounts from other relatives, neighbors, teachers, classmates, acquaintances, friends, enemies, as well as attributed accounts from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*—all verified by official records where possible—and synthesized as the main body of the present story of

this special son of a pioneering, Midwestern family who would become a major figure in twentieth-century American history.

Baby Malcolm was the seventh of Earl's children. The first three were offspring from a previous marriage in rural Georgia, where kinfolks, and father Earl occasionally, would boast that the birth sequence of this new boy-child placed him under a "good luck" sign. This charm-digit, as old as the Bible, was popularized by Negro folklore of the time, as it would be later in blues lyrics, such as the "Hoochie Coochie Man," who was said to have been born: *On the seventh hour*

On the seventh day

On the seventh month

Seven doctors' say

He was born for good luck . . . [5](#)

This fortuitous omen, however, did not attend baby Malcolm in Omaha because he was but the fourth child born to Earl and Louise. The infant did attract attention at University Hospital, where the offspring of Negro couples of extreme light and dark skin tones aroused curiosity among nurses and staffers on the ward. His paternal relatives in Georgia took pride in producing children tall in stature and dark of hue, and this despite the complexion of Earl's mother, Ella, who was light-complexioned with gray eyes. Word circulated on the University Hospital ward, however, that baby Malcolm looked like his own mother, Louise, with a milky complexion and "near-blue" eyes that matched his mother's when she was a child.[6](#)

In a more practical way, father Earl welcomed his new son as a pair of future hands for the plow and other chores around the farmhouse. For the moment though, baby Malcolm was another mouth to be fed by parents who were eking

though, baby Malcolm was another mouth to be fed by parents who were eking out a living under the dismissive eyes of white neighbors, indifferent Omaha officials, and now, the gun barrel of vigilantes on horseback. Experiencing Klan terror firsthand was unnerving to the family, but the

father had grown up hearing widely circulated accounts of deadly Ku Klux Klan lynching in the Deep South.

The father had been born Early Little, in Butler, Georgia, in 1890. He was the son of former slaves, whom only a generation earlier the state had forbade to be taught to read or write, subjecting violators to a \$500 fine, lashings, and possible imprisonment. [7](#) Attending one of the few rural schools for postslavery children, young Early completed the third grade, was subsequently trained as a carpenter and brick mason, and then entered the ministry as a Baptist preacher.

His early schooling came just as the U.S. Supreme Court sanctified Jim Crow laws in its “separate but equal” *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896. It would be more than half a century before Georgia governor Lester Maddox wielded an ax handle in defiance of the Court’s 1954 decision reversing *Plessy* and outlawing school segregation. [8](#) Under the racist Jim Crow system, the education of Negroes was woefully thwarted by white government officials mandating grossly disparate and insufficient expenditures, as well as out-of-date books (castoffs from white schools), poorly trained teachers, and scant job opportunities after graduation. Accordingly, although quite ambitious, smart, and enterprising, Earl (as he was known outside of the family) and Negroes of similar stature, including key members of his family in rural Georgia, were not afforded much chance at formal education.

In the early twentieth century, most black southerners resided on land farmed for its white owners. Charged exorbitant rents, these “sharecroppers” were extended credit for household goods, food, and clothing, all charged against labor on the farm and in the kitchen. Harvesttime usually found the bookkeeping white landowners taking the hog’s share of the crops. Disputes were put down by brute, white force that could all too often turn deadly. Saddled with unpaid bills on the ledgers, the sharecroppers were essentially tied to the tenant farms under a postslavery system of debt peonage. Word of such debtors skipping to the North brought down terror raids upon their families, as did other perceived slights.

Young Malcolm’s paternal grandparents, John and Ella Little, were something of a rarity among Negroes in turn-of-the-century Georgia in that

they owned land. They passed along their drive to own property to their son Early, and he to his children, most especially to Malcolm's older half sister Ella. Later,

this anointed eldest child would recall how her traveling evangelist dad, ever enterprising, used to occasionally exhibit her at various churches to emphasize a preaching point from the Bible. "I'd have my little chair on the pulpit," Ella fondly recollected. [9](#)

During Earl's adolescence in Georgia, he was, it was said, quite reluctant to yield to the tradition of Southern etiquette that required Negroes to accede to total white dominance. State law defined the suppressed class as anyone with

"any ascertainable trace of Negro blood," [10](#) and the statutes segregated the races on public transport and in prisons, mental hospitals, barbershops, pool halls, and public schools. A poll tax made Negro voting almost nonexistent in their home state. Young Early's natural rebelliousness attracted the notice of local white merchants and—as was the the pattern of the day—he was tagged by the dangerous sobriquet "uppity nigger." [11](#) Later, when he was a young husband, Reverend Little's intransigence occasioned brushes with the law. This, coupled with frequent household squabbles with his first wife, Daisy Mason, placed him at odds with his more "servile" in-laws, according to his two sisters. Conflicts flared openly between the two families and rendered the marriage rocky throughout. Moreover, Earl's alarming tendency to back-talk to whites in public reportedly placed the "uppity nigger" preacher in danger wherever he traveled throughout the South.

According to relatives, Early's father, "Pa John"—conforming to the pattern of concerned Negro parents of the times—advised that his "uppity" son, for safety's sake, should gather his family and leave Georgia and, for that matter, the South. [12](#) Eventually the young father did just that, departing abruptly—although without his wife of almost ten years and their three children, Ella, Mary, and Earl Jr.

Landing a job in Philadelphia, the restless young, carpenter-preacher was soon exposed to the secular teaching of Marcus Garvey, whose Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) sought to uplift the race globally. Reverend Little was deeply impressed. The message of the campaigning

Marcus Garvey struck Earl as just the tonic for an independent-minded Negro in search of himself. It was not so much the UNIA's global outreach to Africa that finally persuaded the young preacher as it was the group's uncompromising tenet that the individual free himself from the strictures of the psyche imposed by white racist domination in America—and that Negroes demand equal treatment across the board.

The peripatetic Reverend Earl Little, separated from the family he had abandoned in Georgia, occasionally went to Canada to hear Marcus Garvey speak and once, when he was between jobs, sought a brief respite from U.S. racism as a UNIA camp follower. In the Commonwealth nation of Canada, the Caribbean UNIA members, as British subjects, could move about more freely.

At a UNIA meeting during a visit to Montreal, Earl met a handsome, twenty-year-old* woman from the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada, Louise Helen Langdon Norton, [13](#) who worked as a seamstress and housekeeper for white families. She had migrated to this Quebec city in 1917 with her uncle, Edgerton Langdon, who had introduced her to the teaching of Marcus Garvey. The tall, light-complexioned Louise had attended a religious school under the English system that stressed geography, mathematics, and language skills. She spoke English with a Caribbean accent, as well as Spanish and a smattering of French.

Never having known her Scottish father, Louise was raised by a stern grandmother, Mary Jane Langdon, and aunt, Gertrude, after her unmarried mother, Edith, died during the birth of her third child.

After a brief courtship, the twenty-nine-year-old separated father of three, who some relatives say never divorced his first wife, Daisy, took the younger Grenadian as his bride, in May 1919, six months after the war had ended in Europe. Soon after, the couple left Canada and settled in Philadelphia, where their first child, Wilfred, was born on February 12, 1920. A few months later, Earl, shifting among several jobs, took his young family to Georgia to meet his parents and siblings. Louise was in her second pregnancy. Relatives noted that Earl had landed a young beauty but assumed that the neatly

dressed, well-spoken, Caribbean-bride-made-American-citizen, the product of five years of strict Anglican education, was a snob not much given to hard work. They were wrong in this assumption because Louise, as a youngster, had been entrusted with running the household of her grandmother and aunt. Housework, responsibility, and authority, enforced with corporal punishment, were nothing new to the West Indian mother of a growing family. When mixing it up, especially with the womenfolk, Louise was careful to concentrate her talk on what they had in common, such as housekeeping, child-rearing, and racial discrimination. And she wisely did more listening than talking.[14](#)

In short order, Louise also rolled up her sleeves and cordially dispelled all notions of sloth with thoroughgoing housework that won over her husband's family—all except for the wife from Reverend Little's first marriage, and her family. The Masons were understandably livid that Early had the temerity to parade his pregnant new bride before the family he had abandoned for parts unknown. The first wife, according to their daughter Ella, threatened to stage a

unknown. The first wife, according to their daughter Ella, threatened to stage a Daisy-Louise showdown during the family visit.

Once again, Early's father intervened to preserve peace at home and the family's reputation downtown. Just as when the son first migrated north, Pa John feared that his son's "uppity" rebelliousness was certain to attract local law enforcement, and possibly a visit from white vigilantes.[15](#) In due course, Early and his pregnant wife and son headed back north. And when his bachelor brother James landed a job at a large meatpacking company in the Midwest, where jobs were plentiful, Earl and Louise were invited to join him in Omaha. The migration of Negroes to the city was the largest on the Great Plains at the time.

With 10,315 such residents, Omaha was second only to Los Angeles, in cities west of the Missouri River, in terms of black population. [16](#)

As a frontier settlement in 1854, Omaha had been named after a Native American tribe that the U.S. government restricted at the time to a

reservation in northeastern Nebraska. In the Siouan language of the tribe, “Omaha” means

“those going against the current.” [17](#) The fate that had befallen this tribe stood as an ominous warning to residents who challenged the federal government. It’s not a stretch, however, to note that the determined resistance of Earl and Louise to racist suppression matched the spirit of the Omaha tribe. Nor is it an exaggeration to suggest that the couple’s fierce determination, against overwhelming odds, would be sharply reflected in their fourth-born child, Malcolm.

While constituting only 5 percent of the city population, the strictly segregated Negro community of Omaha supported forty small Protestant churches; some one hundred family businesses, including a few doctors, lawyers, and dentists; and two dozen elite, secret social clubs and organizations. [18](#) Feature stories about the activities of these groups, as well as news of the entire community, could be found in the weekly *Monitor*, the local Negro newspaper. And community activists had established, in 1912, the first chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) west of the Mississippi River. The civil rights group, however, was severely challenged as racial tension initially flared in Omaha when local meatpacking firms in 1917 recruited Negroes as strikebreakers, pitting these longtime Americans against immigrant workers from Europe. These Caucasians had not themselves been integrated as full-fledged white Americans. However, they had gained the upper hand in the workplace by controlling the unions as well as the crime syndicate in town. As white Americans on probation, these

foreign-born Europeans, mainly Irish Catholics, cracked down brutally on incoming Negro citizens from the Deep South—as if such behavior would speed their acceptance by the dominant, native-born whites. In 1918, the Irish hold on the workplace was threatened when Edward Parson Smith, a reform-minded Anglo candidate, defeated the longtime machine mayor, who had been more tolerant of the unions and the criminal syndicate. These contending political forces—with Negroes trapped as the consensus underclass—created an explosive atmosphere in the city.

And the next year, when a frenzy of race rioting was sweeping the nation, a local killing was so gruesome that it got this Nebraska city featured on the “lynching” map under what historians labeled the Omaha incident.

As returning military veterans competed for jobs and housing amid major population shifts, including the Great Migration, in which some half a million blacks moved from the South to Northern and Midwestern cities, racial violence went full throttle. Having fought for democracy in Europe, where they were treated more equally, Negro soldiers pushed for their civil rights at home, thereby rocking the prewar status quo. Even before the signing of the Versailles Treaty, which officially concluded the war with Germany, a race riot led by U.S.

sailors erupted in Charleston, South Carolina; during this melee on May 10, 1919, three Negroes were killed, with injuries on both sides. In Chicago that July, a weeklong explosion flared at a segregated beach, with thirty-eight deaths, some fifteen of them whites, as Negroes fought back.

“We return from fighting. We return fighting,” wrote W. E. B. Du Bois in the May issue of *The Crisis*, the NAACP magazine.^{[19](#)} The Windy City riot was part of a firestorm that hit some thirty-three cities, with mainly white mobs attacking Negroes, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Hundreds were left homeless and about 175 were killed, including at least 76 Negroes who were lynched, 11 of them war veterans. Writer James Weldon Johnson dubbed this bloody conflagration the Red Summer, even though it flamed on into October.^{[20](#)}

Negroes campaigning for equality were said by some federal officials to be under the influence of the Bolsheviks, who had recently staged the Russian revolution, giving rise to America’s first so-called Red Scare, which replaced anti-German sentiment among whites in the United States. “The American negro returning from abroad would be our greatest medium for conveying bolshevism to America,” President Woodrow Wilson reportedly told his personal physician,

Dr. Cary Grayson. “The French people have placed the negro soldier in France on an equality with the white man,” Grayson wrote in his diary,

adding that President Wilson stated, “And it has gone to their heads.” [21](#)

The Red Summer spark that touched off the racial explosion in Omaha was more typical of a Deep South powder keg. In fact, the origins of this race riot were part of a familiar trope of American history. Nineteen-year-old Agnes Loebeck reported that she and her boyfriend were attacked walking home from a movie theater on September 25, 1919. A “Negro jumped out of the weeds at us,”

she said, and robbed the couple at pistol point. According to newspaper accounts, Loebeck claimed that the man “dragged me into the weeds by my hair and assaulted me.” [22](#)

“I tried to scream,” she said, “but he covered my mouth with his left hand,”

while adroitly holding the pistol on her “crippled” boyfriend, Milton Hoffman.[*23](#) As with other Red Summer allegations in the news, local authorities made little effort to check the validity of the white accuser’s sketchy claims.

“Black Beast” screamed the sub-headline of the first-day story in the notoriously race-baiting *Omaha Daily Bee*. Its front-page story tagged the unconfirmed episode “the most daring attack on a white woman ever perpetrated in Omaha.”

[24](#)

The very next day, Will Brown, a Negro man of about forty with acute rheumatism, was pointed out as “suspicious” by a white resident who had observed that Brown, a packing house worker from Cairo, Illinois, was renting a room at a woman’s home nearby.[25](#) Police officers brought Brown to Loebeck’s residence as a possible suspect. Already, a raucous crowd, whipped up by the *Omaha Bee*’s yellow journalism, had created a circus atmosphere outside the teenager’s home, where she supposedly identified the startled, middle-aged black laborer as the “guilty man,” although police and U.S. Army reports later indicated that the teenager did not make a positive identification of her alleged attacker. [26](#)

Straightaway, the 250 white residents camped outside the Loebeck home bolted into action. “Don’t take that man to jail!” the white mob shouted, according to one newspaper account. “Let us have him. The courts won’t punish him. We will!” [27](#) Bent on making the arrest, the city police called in reinforcements but barely managed to extricate Brown from a group attempting to loop a rope around his neck. Several men even landed a few blows about the heads and shoulders of the cops as others punctured the tires of their patrol cars.

The officers finally managed to escort the Negro suspect to booking at court, and later to jail. Headed by the reform-minded Mayor Smith, city hall was despised by the mostly Irish mob, which had been lathered up by news reports, a local crime syndicate leader, simmering tension in the workplace, and deep-seated fear and hatred of Negroes said to be after their jobs—and now their women.[28](#)

The racial horrors of the Red Summer—played out in cities from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, to New London, Connecticut, and across to Texarkana, Texas—were so well rehearsed that the innocent Will Brown had already been convicted of a capital crime against white womanhood by the Omaha press. Indeed, local working-class whites pursued the meatpacking worker as a handy scapegoat for their own problems, to say nothing of their insecurities about black sexual prowess.

At 3:00 p.m. that Sunday, some “200 boys,” aged fourteen to twenty, from the Bancroft School, which Loebeck had attended, were intercepted by detectives as they marched on the Douglas County Courthouse, according to

“Omaha’s Riot in Story and Picture,” a twenty-six-page pamphlet reporting on the incident. One of the leaders reportedly rode a horse “from whose saddle hung a long rope.” Within two hours, the “boys’ brigade” was joined by thousands of white adults, mainly immigrants, who pushed one policeman through a glass door, assaulted two others, and rushed the courthouse. When policemen trained a water hose on the crowd, they countered with “bricks and sticks” and broke

“nearly every window on the south side” as they “swarmed about the courthouse on all sides.” [29](#)

“We are going to teach these Negroes a lesson,” said one man, a local newspaper reported. The crowd was estimated at 10,000 to 20,000 people, angry, mainly Caucasian immigrant men and women. It seemed as if all of white Omaha, save authorities, was united in this bloodthirsty pursuit of a Negro American citizen innocent by every standard of a lawful society. The residents pillaged nearby hardware stores and pawn shops, stealing more than a thousand revolvers and shotguns, according to police records. As the sheriff and his deputies periodically dodged bullets themselves, the irate workers and idlers torched the lower floors of the courthouse with gasoline.

Inside the stately courthouse, Will Brown moaned to Sheriff Mike Clark, “I am innocent; I never did it; my God I am innocent,” the more reliable *Morning World-Herald* told its readers. And a local reporter and attorney who interviewed Brown in jail agreed with a physical examination report that Brown was “too twisted by rheumatism to assault anyone.” [30](#)

The white mob made clear its nonnegotiable demand: prisoner Brown was to be taken from the fifth-floor jail cell and handed over to them. When Police Chief Marshal Eberstein failed to quell the crowd, Mayor Smith, whom the immigrants in the mob blamed for their labor discontent with Negroes, emerged from the flaming courthouse at about eleven that evening and pleaded for order.

Someone hit Smith “on the head with a baseball bat.” Another man “slipped the noose of a rope around [the mayor’s] neck,” and the crowd dragged him away.

Several “spectators . . . wrested the mayor from his captors and placed him in a police automobile.” Within minutes, the crowd recaptured its victim, roped him once again, and managed nearly to suspend the body of Omaha’s chief executive from a traffic signal tower. [31](#)

On the verge of strangulation, the dangling Mayor Smith was dramatically rescued by special agents driving through the throng in a “high-powered automobile.” They rushed the mayor to the hospital—where, after two days on the critical list, he would recover. One not-so-lucky sixteen-year-old was shot dead while leading a gang to the fourth floor of the courthouse. A block away, James Hiykel, a thirty-four-year-old businessman, was shot dead by

two stray bullets. Throughout the melee, “Negroes were dragged from streetcars and beaten,” [32](#) while other such unsuspecting pedestrians were chased down on sight. Well-meaning whites attempting to render aid were themselves battered about.

Meanwhile, the gasoline-fed flames lapped up the side of the five-story building, where policemen, court officers, and 121 prisoners had fled to the roof.

Despite cries for mercy, the mob blocked all attempts to hoist rescue ladders, and they severed water hoses that firemen hooked up to nearby hydrants. As the roof weakened under the heat, the women prisoners were allowed to depart the building. However, the men trapped by the inferno yelled through the billowing smoke for help as some of the married officers reportedly placed goodbye telephone calls to their wives and families.

“Bring Brown with you,” shouted one man, “and you can come down!” [33](#)

The bloodthirsty mob had clearly regained its singular focus on “the Nigger.”

With human incineration a distinct possibility, trapped officials on the fourth floor tossed down three notes.

“The judge says he will give up Negro Brown. He is in dungeon,” one piece scrawled. “There are 100 white prisoners on the roof. Save them.” Another note read, “Come to the fourth floor of the building and we will hand the negro over to you.” Then, with automobile spotlights trained on the burning courthouse, two

nimble young men with a shotgun and a coil of rope scaled the west wall to the fourth floor to the accompaniment of thunderous cheering punctuated by a

“fusillade of shots.” [34](#)

A mighty roar went up from the crowd with word that “Will Brown had been captured,” reported “Omaha’s Riot in Story and Picture,” which was published that year by the Educational Publishing Company. This most

destructive riot by the lawless white mob was reported in the journal as having been sparked by “a boyish sense of mistaken chivalry.” And in a mere eight-line paragraph, the pamphlet summarized what the mob did next to their Negro captive.

According to newspaper accounts, some eleven hours past church services, the white rioters, still dressed in their Sunday fancy, proceeded to beat Will Brown bloody as he proclaimed his innocence. Shredding his clothes from his torso, they mercilessly whipped the near-naked Negro, who pleaded for his life as the mob cheered. The captive was then dragged to the higher of two lampposts on the south side of the smoldering courthouse, where several immigrant attackers slid the knotted noose around the neck of this American citizen vaguely accused. Then, without so much as a rhetorical question about his guilt, they slung the cord over the arm of the pole and jerked the middle-aged, arthritic laborer off the ground. The abrupt snapping of live, human vertebrae, a sound like no other, brought a blood-chilling hush upon the crowd.

The limp body of Will Brown began to spin rapidly from the centripetal force of the hoisting. It steadied only when gunmen fired a volley of some hundred bullets into the roped torso.

The eerie scene moved the white mob to rapture. No other word seems appropriate. Whooping catcalls rang out like hosannas in a church revival, with the accompaniment of wild gunfire resounding throughout the smoke-filled Omaha plaza at the approach of midnight.

In due course, a few rawboned young men lowered Brown’s stiff body on the taut rope and tied it to the rear bumper of an automobile. A driver gunned the engine and what was left of the cadaver was driven through the wildly cheering throng of Omaha revelers, eager as hyenas at an antelope kill. At the intersection of rampage-cluttered Seventeenth and Dodge Streets, several other men hustled up kerosene from nearby danger-signal lamps used for street repairs. And in the autumn hush of midnight, a few pale, sweating attackers doused Brown’s body on a woodpile with coal oil and set the corpse ablaze.

Dozens of sporty youths in peaked caps and sweaters, along with churchgoing men in wool suits, neckties, and felt hats, swaggered about the killing ground, posing for photographs with the shredded body of their victim.

killing ground, posing for photographs with the shredded body of their victim.

Wide-eyed and eager, white residents of Omaha were photographed in full celebration of their naked human sacrifice roasting on an open pyre.

The lynching of Will Brown was witnessed by one fourteen-year-old who would grow up to become a leading Hollywood actor, portraying quiet,

“quintessentially American heroes.” His movie roles included *Young Mr.*

Lincoln, as well as the juror who saves a Latino man from an all-white jury’s death sentence in *Twelve Angry Men*. Henry Fonda recalled that as a teenager he peered down at the handiwork of his neighbors that night from the second-floor window of his father’s printing shop. “My hands were wet and there were tears in my eyes,” the adult Fonda said of this incident of his childhood. Presumably, the youngster never left his perch for the hours-long lynching episode, reportedly standing the entire time alongside his father, William. “When it was all over, we went home . . . All I could think of was that young black man dangling at the end of [a rope].” [35](#)

By 3:00 a.m. on Monday, September 29, federal troops of the Twentieth Infantry restored order by setting up machine-gun and one-pound-cannon emplacements in the downtown business district and, as a precaution, in the

“black belt” section of town. The troops were under the command of General Leonard Wood, who two decades earlier had led Theodore Roosevelt’s Rough Riders during the Spanish-American War and had been a contender for the Republican presidential nomination in 1916. “Omaha is not ashamed, but Omaha is frightened,” wrote *The New York Times*, which reported that “at least 2,000

negroes have left the city by railroad.” [36](#) A headline that day in the *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, which would win a 1920 Pulitzer Prize for its

editorial

“Law and the Jungle,” read:

FRENZIED THOUSANDS JOIN IN ORGY OF BLOOD AND FIRE

Crowds Search Through Streets Attacking Negroes

Everywhere³⁷

Unlike some of the Red Summer riots, or the lynching of Negroes in the

Unlike some of the Red Summer riots, or the lynching of Negroes in the South, the Omaha incident was complicated by the collateral loss of white lives and heavy damage to public property. Therefore, it could not be so easily dismissed by officials. Significantly, in the frenzy of seizing and torturing Will Brown, the largely immigrant mob had attacked local police and even the sitting mayor. Additionally, two white men were killed accidentally and fifty-six others injured, including policemen. The mob also had wreaked about \$750,000 in damage to the stately Douglas County Courthouse alone, including the loss of property records, tax lists, and other documents. This lawlessness against white residents and public property necessitated that judicial authorities prosecute, or at least identify, the more culpable transgressors among the largely immigrant crowd.

Accordingly, under a federally authorized investigation, martial law authorities and police reportedly rounded up “many of the mob leaders,” totaling some 120 persons, and held them for trial in state court. Of those indicted or jailed for involvement in the riot, none reportedly served prison time. However,

“with the view of stimulating serious thought and a possible probe into conditions that seem to foster anarchy,” authorities commissioned an investigation that, as previously mentioned, was printed as a twenty-six-page pamphlet. “The psychologist will be interested in the mental reactions of the mob to the circumstantial stimuli,” it noted. “The layman will exercise a

righteous curiosity in the hope of learning why law-abiding men and women become as wild beasts under the influence of the mob idea.” [38](#)

The Omaha police later verified that the kingpin of the local Irish crime syndicate, one Tom “Pick-Handle” Dennison, had in several other instances paid whites in blackface to attack white women, not unlike Agnes Loebeck, in order to embarrass Mayor Smith and city hall. And a subsequent grand jury report stated: “Several reported assaults [reported in the *Omaha Bee*] on white women had actually been perpetrated by whites in blackface.” [39](#) The authorities all but specified that the reported attack on a white woman that sparked the ghastly lynching was probably staged by white men in blackface. Once again, a Negro had been set up as the scapegoat of cold-blooded white residents who considered themselves civilized, superior even. And except for the incontrovertible fact of Will Brown’s body having been incinerated at the center of the Omaha incident, no precise accounting was recorded of the damage wreaked upon black lives and property that hellish day and night. Nor was anyone ever convicted of the kidnapping, torture, brutal killing, and desecration of the victim, an innocent

American citizen. What was left of Brown’s body was buried in an unmarked grave in a potter’s field while an interment log listed him as “Lynched.”

Grisly photographs of Brown’s body roasting on the pyre were sold as postcards at the time. And rope used in his lynching reportedly fetched ten cents a length as souvenirs. Such was the savagery of whites in Omaha and the barbarism in matters of justice for Negroes across America in the 1920s—and well beyond. As was the national pattern, the open-ended mob-lynching was dangled for years as a warning to migrating Negroes seeking jobs and justice on the Great Plains.

[*](#) There is a discrepancy regarding Louise Little’s age. When she was admitted to Kalamazoo State Hospital on January 9, 1939, her age was recorded as forty-two, making her birth year 1897, the date we use in the book. According to Erik McDuffie’s 2016 essay on Louise Little (see note 2

for this chapter), her birth date on her baptismal records in Grenada is listed as January 2, 1894.

† Newspapers reported the name of Agnes Loebeck's boyfriend as Millard for several days before correcting it to Milton.

CHAPTER 2

Storms of Racism

THE TERROR GENERATED BY THE OMAHA LYNCHING, AS WELL as hundreds of other atrocities, had the intended effect of creating an indelible sense of fear and anger that suffused the consciousness of virtually every Negro American during the 1920s. However, faced with death threats in the Deep South—where local sheriffs openly assisted white lynch mobs, and where newspapers didn't consider such atrocities “newsworthy”—Negroes continued their Great Migration north by the tens of thousands. One of these Omaha job seekers was James Little, joined by his married brother Oscar. And with the racist threat growing worse, they were joined in Nebraska by their rebellious brother Earl and his wife. Despite the racist terror in Omaha, Earl and Louise would insist upon establishing a chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in the city.

From this uncertain foundation on the Great Plains would spring a singular life that, even now, continues to give voice to people struggling for their human rights against powerful forces imbued with a false sense of white superiority.

But to understand what brought forth this dynamic advocate for those conversely afflicted, often unknowingly, by a false sense of black inferiority, it is necessary not only to examine young Malcolm's childhood environment but also to detail relevant acts by white Americans that constituted barbarous, racist torts against Negro Americans of his day. Chief among these offenses was the daily violation

of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, among other broken contracts with citizens not deemed “free white males.”

Shortly before Reverend Earl Little and his wife, Louise, arrived in the city, native-born white residents, as if envious of the European immigrants who staged the Omaha incident, invited the Ku Klux Klan to launch a local operation, according to an official of the Atlanta-based group. It was not coincidental that the Klan was closed to Catholics and non-Anglo European immigrants. Inspired nonetheless by the Will Brown lynching, locals in early 1921 established Klavern Number One, the first KKK unit in Nebraska, on Forty-First and Farnan Streets.¹ Despite petty squabbles over political turf and internal rivalries, Omaha whites, both foreign and domestic, stood united in suppressing Negro citizens as a permanent underclass. This kind of threat the parents of baby Malcolm would know well and were determined to resist as UNIA organizers.

A brief history of the Klan is useful to put into perspective the hooded knights of the 1920s who were sworn to “keep blacks in their place.” The white-supremacist group was created immediately after the Civil War as an on-the-ground terror organization to help officialdom deny Negroes the fulfillment of promises made in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, as well as those of the 1866 Civil Rights Act. The group’s robed and hooded night riders, many of them bitterly arrayed as vanquished Confederate veterans, terrorized former slaves pursuing their constitutional rights as citizens. When the national Republican and Democratic parties beat back Reconstruction at the federal level—culminating with the Hayes-Tilden Compromise of 1877, which withdrew federal troops from the South and permitted Jim Crow laws to enshrine segregation and suppress Southern Negroes as second-class citizens—the Klan faded from prominence.

In 1915, however, the white knights were widely introduced to popular culture—and eventually reintroduced to real life—by director D. W. Griffith’s movie *The Birth of a Nation*. Released on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Civil War, the silent film was based on a pro-Klan novel, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, by Thomas Dixon. The three-hour film celebrates the Southern Confederacy, damns the Yankees, and renders Negroes as unspeakable hoodlums, political tyrants, and violators of white womanhood.

In something of an artistic foreshadowing of the real-life staging of the reported sexual attack in the Will Brown lynching in Omaha, the hapless black villains in Griffith's movie are mainly white cast members in blackface. And the overall Klan message was made more lethal on film by the technical innovations of

director Griffith and his attention to the minutest detail, which revolutionized the art of moviemaking. For example, there were three thousand horses in the production, and a battery of two hundred seamstresses labored for two months producing historically accurate costumes for the eighteen thousand cast members. [2](#)

This Hollywood portrayal of the Klan as noble saviors of white America was so popular that President Wilson, a native Virginian with ingrained racist views, screened *The Birth of a Nation* in the White House; it was the first movie ever shown there and a political nod to Southern racist supporters. Negroes across the country staged demonstrations against the film. William Monroe Trotter, a black journalist who a year earlier had been removed from Wilson's White House for protesting the president's segregation policies, waged an even more strenuous campaign against Griffith's film. But the Southern director's "masterpiece,"

premiering to segregated audiences in Atlanta, aroused white racists to arms for miles around. A notorious former Methodist preacher, one William J. Simmons, retreated to Stone Mountain, Georgia, with at least fifteen other local firebrands, including the speaker of the Georgia legislature. Simmons, the son of a physician who had been a leader of the original Alabama Klan of the 1860s, presided over a squad of men shivering before a burning cross of pine boards. They placed a Bible on a jutting rock altar, along with an American flag, a canteen of water, and a sword, over which they swore allegiance to wage an armed campaign against Negroes seeking rights as full citizens of the United States.

During the night of fireworks on November 15, 1915, this band of fierce and fearsome Georgians reconstituted the Ku Klux Klan as a secret organization of native-born "Protestants, white, gentile Americans." And for generations the hooded, white horsemen would crack down brutally on Negro progress with such terror methods as firebombings, torture, abduction, castration,

gang rape, and death by gunfire, drowning, and lynching. This revived group of self-described white supremacists expressed a stronger intolerance for Jews and Catholics than the original Klan. Despite its signature cross-burning ceremony—

a visual innovation Hollywood gave the revised white knights—and its armed night raids on the homes of unsuspecting residents, the “secret” Ku Klux Klan also operated in full daylight, with faces unhidden. The reborn Klan became one of the most effective groups at influencing postwar American policy, campaigning vigorously, for example, for Prohibition and against non-Anglo immigration from Europe. With its largest klaverns outside the South in Indiana, Colorado, and Michigan, the national organization claimed a membership of

some 3 million that included sheriffs, cops, district attorneys, mayors, and at least two sitting governors, not to mention hundreds of thousands of women. So encompassing was its sectional appeal that it also enrolled one future Supreme Court justice, Hugo Black of Alabama, who later described the Birmingham klavern as “a fraternal organization, really” but quit after two years. According to some historians, the Klan even attracted a subsequent U.S. president, Harry S.

Truman, who as a candidate for office in Jackson County, Missouri, reportedly sought Klan backing but asked for his Klan dues back when ordered not to appoint Catholics to government positions. At the height of its political power, the Klan flexed its muscle when some forty thousand white-robed men and women waved American flags and proudly paraded down Pennsylvania Avenue in the nation’s capital as onlookers cheered on August 8, 1925—a few months after local KKK vigilantes had terrorized Malcolm’s pregnant mother, Louise.

Upon arriving in Omaha on the heels of the Brown lynching and months after the formation of the Omaha klavern, Reverend Little landed an industry job, and settled in initially with the Smiley family on the Negro side of town.

Soon after, Louise gave birth to daughter Hilda, on October 22, 1921, then son Philbert eighteen months later. Scars of the Omaha incident were still visible downtown, and at barbershops, hairdressers, social clubs, and family

gatherings, the Little family heard neighbors talk warily about how the Brown lynching had totally disrupted their lives. As if that were not terror enough, local Negroes now faced the better armed and organized menace of homegrown white-racist Klansmen. Straightaway, Klavern Number One launched separate youth branches for boys and girls, and a Women of the Klan auxiliary that expanded its Omaha rolls to eleven hundred, according to the *Monitor*. In due course, Klan officials would claim a statewide tally of forty-five thousand members of every age, gender, and social class, who regularly mounted street demonstrations, weekend parades, and cross-burning ceremonies in open fields.

Early on, local whites branded Reverend Little and his wife as troublemakers, in part because they had established the UNIA chapter. When a Klan letter was posted in the *Monitor*, Louise and her husband got the boastful missive reprinted in the UNIA journal, the *Negro World*. “White supremacy is our slogan and we are going to rule this country without the aid or consent of the Negro,” wrote the Klan leader. As a warning for families such as the Littles, the letter continued, “We are checking up on you [Negroes]. . . . Omaha comes next.” UNIA leader Marcus Garvey used the Klan letter, along with the 1919

Omaha riot, to make his case that America would brutally defend white



supremacy at all cost.[3](#)

Garvey’s international group differed noticeably from its domestic rival, the strictly homegrown National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Both were nonviolently opposed to racial oppression, but the NAACP was at the time predominantly white. It had been founded in 1909 in New York City with some sixty charter members—only seven of whom were

“colored.” The organization that Malcolm’s parents joined was exclusively black, and as community activists, they focused on the domestic group tenets counseling self-reliance, independent mindedness, and a fierce racial pride—all dangerous pursuits for Negroes in the United States. As their family grew,

Earl and Louise would insist upon fairness for their children at school, just as they demanded it for themselves in housing and elsewhere. Again and again, they would pay a terrible price for their stance. Even before the Klan horsemen rode up to their door on the outskirts of Omaha in the spring of 1925, a white delegation had paid Earl's bosses a visit at the meatpacking plant where he earned his living. They demanded that the "uppity nigger" be fired—or else. He was let go.

So by the time Malcolm was born, Reverend Little was supporting his growing family with freewill offerings from churches and housing repair jobs he picked up as an independent contractor. "He'd drive around in the neighborhoods where he might see things that needed repair," Wilfred remembered. "He'd make them an offer; they agreed to it and he'd go ahead and repair whatever it was—or he'd build an outhouse, all kind of stuff." [4](#) Such repair work fell within the skill set of Malcolm's father, who had trained as a carpenter and mason back in Georgia.

Already, some two generations out of slavery, when statistically they had been three-fifths of a person, "Negroes" conducted an unrequited love affair with the republic that had, reluctantly at best, freed them in 1863. They fought in U.S.

wars and paid taxes. They rendered cheap labor on railroads and docks, in factories, private kitchens, and cotton fields. Although fulfilling the *obligations* of citizenship, Negroes were systematically denied the *benefits*. White supremacy was certified and enforced as national policy by the full force of the Supreme Court, Congress, and the executive branch of the federal government, although in wholly different ways. The Court's 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson*

"separate but equal" ruling was a sham decision that froze in place an

impregnable caste structure under legalized segregation. Negroes were repressed as a permanent underclass and were flagrantly denied equal access to housing, jobs, education, public accommodations, due process in the courts, and, despite the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, the guaranteed right to vote. Even when American women were granted the vote in 1920,

Negroes across gender lines were largely denied the franchise, especially in the South, where some 80

percent of them lived.

Even in the nation's capital, racial segregation was the law of the land, harshly enforced by no less authority than that of the president. In addition to mandating separate and less well-appointed and maintained cafeterias and toilet facilities for Negroes in federal buildings, Woodrow Wilson had allowed the Treasury Department and the Post Office to segregate black civil-service employees from whites by makeshift wooden partitions. One colored postal clerk, whose duties required regular contact with whites in the office, "had a cage built around him," according to a letter of complaint to President Wilson from noted scholar W. E. B. Du Bois. When, as previously mentioned, William Monroe Trotter, the editor of the widely read Negro newspaper the *Boston Guardian*, took a delegation of Negro leaders to the White House to protest this segregated federal policy, President Wilson rebuffed them sharply.

"Segregation is not humiliating, but a benefit, and ought to be so regarded by you gentlemen," President Wilson told the delegation from the National Independent Equal Rights League during its November 12, 1914, visit. When Trotter disputed Wilson's claim that federal employees were racially separated to avoid friction, the president, as widely reported in *The New York Times* and elsewhere, cited Trotter's "tone" and dismissed the delegation leader. "Your manner offends me," Wilson muttered. [5](#) Despite street rallies defending Trotter, the federal government continued to segregate the races for decades.

When in early 1917 the president subsequently petitioned Congress to enter the war in Europe to make the world "safe for democracy," Negro leaders debated what their stance should be toward an administration that so egregiously denied them equal rights. Should they push for inclusion in American society and join the fight? After having supported Wilson's candidacy in 1912, Du Bois was appalled by the president's eager collaboration with racist Southern legislators. However, just as abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass had argued for blacks to fight during the Civil

War, Du Bois urged them to join the ranks of Wilson's racially segregated army and drew sharp personal criticism for his support.

White military officers, however, were reluctant to field armed black GIs against the European soldiers of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the other Central Powers. The Marines strongly opposed accepting Negro volunteers, and those the Navy accepted were restricted to noncombatant, menial posts as stewards or mess-hall workers. Still, some 2.3 million Negroes registered for the draft, with 370,000 inducted into the military. And despite heavy resistance from white officers and fellow soldiers, Negroes performed acts of battlefield valor that went largely unnoticed. Not until seventy-three years later—when a government review disclosed strong racial bias in the Army—would America award a Medal of Honor to a black combatant from World War I. In a 1991

White House ceremony, President George H. W. Bush presented the honor to the sister of Corporal Freddie Stowers, who had been recommended for it shortly after he died from wounds suffered when he led an assault on fortified German trenches.

In a postwar editorial in *The Crisis*, Du Bois, again like Frederick Douglass, urged Negroes to “close ranks” for full citizenship and to “marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land.” [6](#) Later in 1919, Du Bois more specifically wrote: “For three centuries we have suffered and cowered. No race ever gave passive submission to evil longer, more piteous trial. Today we raise the terrible weapon of self-defense. When the murderer comes, he shall no longer strike us in the back. When the armed lynchers gather, we too must gather armed. When the mob moves, we propose to meet it with bricks and clubs and guns.” [7](#) Despite the odds, Du Bois urged Negroes to make their armed stand in the land where their forebears labored and died as slaves.

The foreign-born Marcus Garvey was convinced otherwise and counseled not black fight but black flight, at least psychologically, and in some cases physically, from the presence and influence of the white men he considered irredeemably racist, too numerous, and far too well armed. In this conflict of perspectives, Garvey would capture the loyalty of both Malcolm's

Caribbean-born mother and his rebellious father from Georgia. Earl Little, a restless man of prodigious energy (with a whispered reputation as a ladies' man), visited the homes of curious Negroes to ply his admixture of Christian gospel and secular Garveyism. Africa was the homeland sure enough, but Garvey's group did not call for mass repatriation in the near term, and unless the specific question was raised, the third-grade-educated Reverend Little did not discuss global, pan-African repatriation at all.

Combating white dominance in the United States during the first quarter of the twentieth century broke down roughly along these two distinct, tactical lines pushed by the NAACP and UNIA, and spearheaded nationally by W. E. B. Du Bois on one side and Marcus Garvey on the other. Ironically, each man had been influenced early on by Booker T. Washington, the famed educator who started Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and who published his influential autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, in 1901. However, the internecine battle between the two camps and their strong-minded leaders would rage for years even as Negroes continued their central struggle for equality.

Du Bois had posed the global parameters of the racial conflict, though not the solution, in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." ⁸ Garvey, agreeing that European colonialism was the dominant world force at the turn of the century, advocated that indigenous peoples in Africa, India, and the rest of Asia should rise up and reclaim their occupied homelands from the illicit white settlers—and leave them Europe, with the United States and the West Indies apparently to be shared with indigenous people of the American landmass.

The British colonization of Jamaica had been a key trigger for Marcus Garvey's program when, at the age of twenty-seven, he founded the UNIA and expanded it as a bulwark against white rule and racism in the West Indies, Africa, Europe, and elsewhere. Following his relocation to America in 1916, the skilled, self-assured promoter, a printer by trade, launched his organization in Harlem, the newly acclaimed capital of Negro America, almost fifty years after the Civil War. Offering his "up you mighty race . . . call to the colored citizens,"

9 which seemed more practical than the NAACP program, the Jamaican leader began barnstorming key cities of the North and also ventured as far south as Atlanta. “The Great West Indian Negro Leader,” as Garvey was billed on promotional posters, directed his “message of inspiration to the 12,000,000 of our people in this country.” 10 And during World War I, he found a surprisingly receptive audience among the thousands of Southern Negroes streaming north in search of industrial jobs at the start of the Great Migration, which would continue into the 1970s and total some six million persons.

Accordingly, Garvey skillfully went after the nonreading Negro masses in America with pomp, glitz, and ceremony. He staged colorful street parades complete with marching bands, Black Cross nurses in white dresses, and men of

erect bearing decked out in military uniforms with medals, lavalieres, and swords. The lead touring car of this extravaganza showcased the “Honorable President,” as Garvey was referred to, done up in a naval dress uniform with gold buttons, sash, silver saber, and a plumed cap befitting a crowned emperor.

This pomp and circumstance was intended to improve blacks’ self-respect. “We must canonize our own saints, create our own martyrs, and elevate to positions of fame and honor black men and women who have made their distinct contributions to our racial history,” Garvey insisted. 11 During the postwar years, the UNIA met in its Liberty Hall site in Harlem with an initial membership mainly of West Indians, who constituted roughly a quarter of the nonwhite population in Upper Manhattan. In due course, Garvey also would attract homegrown Negroes streaming out of the South to work in the war industries of the North and the Midwest.

The group’s first New York City convention, in 1920, packed Madison Square Garden with some 25,000 blacks from throughout the hemisphere.

Boasting 4 million members by 1923, the UNIA ultimately listed some seven hundred branches in thirty-eight states. Insiders put the U.S. number at 20,000 to 30,000 dues-paying members, with thousands more curiosity seekers, supporters, and hangers-on. Garvey would turn out to be one of the

most charismatic evangelists of the 1920s. The federal government zeroed in on him as an

“exceptionally fine orator, creating much excitement among the negroes through his steamship proposition” and saw in his appeal seditious potential.

The Black Star steamship line was a major fund-raising campaign Garvey had launched to establish a shipping operation between the United States and Africa. In a 1919 memo, the young J. Edgar Hoover, head of the Special Intelligence Division in the Bureau of Investigation (the predecessor of the FBI), specializing in deporting “undesirable aliens,” took note of Marcus Garvey as a

“prominent agitator” among Negroes. “Unfortunately,” Hoover wrote Special Agent Ridgely on October 11, Garvey “has not as yet violated any federal law whereby he could be proceeded against on ground of being an undesirable alien.” With an eye toward building a federal deportation case, however, Hoover noted that “there might be some proceeding against him for fraud with his Black Star Line propaganda.” [12](#) Subsequently, in a pattern of domestic spying that would expand ominously through the years and would eerily echo forty years later in its surveillance of Malcolm X, the Bureau hired four Negroes to work the case and had one of them infiltrate the UNIA and spy on Garvey’s every move in Harlem. Detailed memos were filed on all meetings, official contacts, and the

group’s financial records.

Unaware of the government surveillance, Garvey stridently promoted Africa as the proud homeland of all blacks, and unlike Du Bois and the NAACP, he countered claims of white supremacy by proclaiming that, if anything, the Negro was superior. This clarion message had no visible means of enforcement, but it was anathema nonetheless to the white population of early-twentieth-century Omaha and the Midwest that baby Malcolm’s parents encountered. Nationally, the NAACP and its leaders, along with other racially mixed civil rights groups, as well as mainstream Negro churches, would differ with the UNIA over how exactly to combat the formidable superstructure of racism that had characterized the United States since its very founding as a slave-holding republic.

Thundering against the Western view of the colonized “dark continent” as a basket case, the fiery Jamaican leader urged Negroes foremost to work for the

“total redemption of Africa” and to join him in correcting this distorted image of the continent. “I want Mr. Du Bois to know that all American Negroes are not ashamed of Africa,” Garvey told a Liberty Hall audience, decades before an elderly Du Bois would move to Ghana. “Why should we allow the Dutch, the Boers and others to go down into Kimberly and possess the diamond fields. . . .

Why should we allow the Belgians to go down into the Congo and reap the profits of rubber? . . . We shall stand by the slogan: Africa for the Africans.”
[13](#)

The global philosophy of the UNIA was summarized in Garvey’s

“Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World,” [14](#) which he placed alongside the Bible as a guide for those who “with confidence in ourselves”

could “carve our way to liberty.” [15](#) If Africans scattered throughout the diaspora were to progress as a people anywhere in the world, Garvey declared that they must first reclaim the birthplace of humankind as their “noble motherland.”

Broadly, he asked, “Where is the black man’s government? Where is his king and kingdom? Where is his president, his country and his ambassador, his army, his navy, his men of big affairs?” [16](#) As part of a symbolic response to these questions, Garvey designed a “black, red and green” flag for his new republic and declared himself “Provisional President.” (The tricolors would subsequently be adapted by a few African countries upon their liberation.) As a practical matter, however, the UNIA, short-term, was never the single-minded Back to Africa movement that outside critics claimed.

During these post–World War I years, Reverend Earl Little embraced Garvey while in Omaha but chiefly urged Negroes to organize and improve their lot

here in the “white man’s country.” In this, Earl followed the lead of his other



key hero, fellow southerner Booker T. Washington, whose *Up from Slavery* had inspired the teenaged Garvey himself. In his celebrated 1895 speech, dubbed

“The Atlanta Compromise,” Washington, born into slavery in 1856 in Virginia, had urged Negroes to acquiesce to the status quo and to advance in America by lowering their more lofty expectations. This plea for an apparent accommodation with segregation—including famously advising his followers to “cast down your buckets where you are”—earned him the embrace of white southerners and rendered Washington the most influential Negro in America.

While praising Washington, the “great sage of Tuskegee,” as a mentor and even as the inspiration for the formation of the UNIA, Garvey geared his international group to move well beyond Washington’s domestic plan of

“industrial serfdom and industrial peonage.” Garvey’s group would demand a

“place in the *political* sun . . . for “the 400,000,000 Negroes of the world.” The UNIA leader blamed even Frederick Douglass, who had died in 1895, as well as Washington and contemporary Negro leaders, like W. E. B. Du Bois, “for not preparing the minds of the people for the approaching age. No, we won’t make

[that] mistake.” [17](#)

As Garveyites, the parents of young Malcolm followed UNIA’s policy of referring to Africa as the “homeland.” Most Negroes, however, under the sway of Hollywood and prevailing public opinion, rejected the “dark continent” as a nation of savages and an unspeakable embarrassment. During America’s long and genocidal history of slavery and suppression, Negroes had been conditioned

—by state terror and brutal campaigns against aggressive leaders such as Nat Turner—into an apparent state of acceptance as a matter of survival. And under Booker T. Washington’s counseling of group acquiescence, they felt not only inextricably bound to America but also strangely hopeful about their prospects.

Thus Marcus Garvey’s UNIA was increasingly challenged by homegrown interest groups, most especially the white-led NAACP and Du Bois, the erudite Harvard scholar. As a leading intellectual of his day, the Massachusetts-born son of a half-Haitian father [18](#) took great exception to the popularity of Marcus Garvey, the lightly educated autodidact from Jamaica.

In addition to their differences over “fight or flee” tactics, Du Bois and Garvey were separated by a more primal divide that could not be reconciled and that was keenly reflected among their followers. This shadowy ghost had plagued Negroes down through the generations as the group’s nasty little secret: skin color.

skin color.

Among individuals and families of Malcolm’s childhood, for instance, many light-skinned Negroes judged the social fitness, intelligence, status, and the potential compatibility of others—within the race—by their admixture of white bloodlines. Those with lighter shades, along with softer hair texture and rainbow eye colors, were dubbed high yellows, red bones, or simply mixed-race, and, as such, they generally assigned themselves a superior status within the Negro race.

“As your skin gets lighter, your future gets brighter” became a guideline of this prejudice, which, despite periodic ebbs, would survive into the twenty-first century. In most such instances historically, both in the United States and in the West Indies, the white parent or grandparent was paternal and almost universally was absent after the birth of the child, as was Louise’s father back in Grenada.

Having washed their hands of the matter, these fathers generally lived on in respectable denial with their white families across town. Still, despite

laboring under the white-black oppression of slavery, Jim Crow, and persistent racism, some Negroes steadfastly embraced this intragroup color distinction as they grasped for a semblance of power.

Thus, a subcaste system among Negroes, attended by a discriminatory pattern of behavior, sprang up along skin-tone lines and has lingered over the generations as dirty linen in plain view. Negro leaders have generally not abstained or been spared. Early on, it was noted that Marcus Garvey's contempt for lighter-skin competitors was based on his experience with mixed-race Jamaicans back home and, in part, on what he perceived as skin-tone chauvinism among American-born Negro rivals in the NAACP, the National Urban League,

“high-toned” churches, and other civic groups. Like Earl and Louise Little, their light-skinned son Malcolm had to contend with traces of this intragroup, skin-tone bias in dealing with key individuals and organizations throughout his life.

Scholars have traced this behavioral pattern back to the period when mixed-race slaves working within the plantation house would lord it over their brethren sweating in the fields. Whites generally looked on with stone-hearted indifference, if not denial, except when money was involved. Thus, all children of slave mothers were deemed by law to be chattel—no matter the race or circumstance of the father. President Thomas Jefferson, who held captive six hundred slaves, for example, reportedly fathered six children with slave mistress Sally Hemings. Those who lived past infancy were listed on the household ledgers as Negro chattel, the more hands for the kitchen the better. Nonetheless, a class distinction sprang up among chattel slaves, encouraged, perhaps, by some white holders as a method of appeasing bonded mulattos angling for advantages,

white holders as a method of appeasing bonded mulattos angling for advantages, no matter how slight.

Not all “fair-skinned” Negroes played along. The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, a notable mixed-race offspring, for example, reacted to his circumstance by rebelling against white men in denial who condemned their very own children to an inferior state of captive existence. In his *Narrative*

of the Life of Frederick Douglass, the ex-slave Douglass wrote: The whisper that my master was my father may or may not be true; and, true or false, it is of but little consequence to my purpose whilst the fact remains, in all its glaring odiousness, that slaveholders have ordained, and by law established, that the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers. [19](#)

After the Reconstruction period, the U.S. census designated all ex-slaves simply as Negroes—and mistreated them as such. “One drop” of black blood made the case, as had been the custom for centuries. Mulattos or “mixed-race”

types—save those secretly “passing” as Caucasians—were accorded the full range of racial suppression reserved for the Negro en masse. They were banned from jobs reserved for whites; segregated under federal, state, and local Jim Crow practices; restricted to inferior education, housing, and public accommodations; barred from major league sports; assigned to all-Negro military units—and more than a few were lynched without regard to their mixed-blood ancestry, straight hair, light-toned skin, or gray-green eyes.

Thus denied white privilege and rejected even by their paternal blood relatives, a determined segment of the mulatto subcaste resorted to mimicking the *petit* aspects of American racism toward dark-skinned Negroes. Over the years, with some exceptions, this rising so-called black bourgeoisie, including some civil rights organizers, maintained a *petit* caste system exercising economic, social, and psychological advantage over their darker Negro neighbors—and sometimes blood relatives, siblings even. The practice was most common among Negroes along the Tidewater basin of the Virginias, in the District of Columbia, in large swaths of the Carolinas, and in niches of the Deep South, such as Atlanta, and most especially in New Orleans, and patches of Louisiana; but it was not unknown in urban areas such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and even New York City.

Functionally, the “bright skin” Negro class screened out darker members of the race from prime enrollment at historically black colleges and universities, banning them altogether from certain Greek fraternities and